

“This is sacred cloth.” M. K. Gandhi

Khadi or khaddar is the term conventionally used in North and Central India to refer to varieties of coarse cotton cloth hand woven using hand spun yarn. This was the cloth commonly worn by peasant and artisan groups in pre-industrial India. It was made from locally grown cotton which would be harvested by peasants and labourers, spun by local women and woven into cloth by men from various specialist weaving castes. The precise technology involved in the production of khadi would vary from region to region, as would the techniques used for its decoration (dying, embroidery, printing etc.) Although hand spun hand woven cotton cloth of this kind was common throughout India, it was not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when its production and use were in severe decline that the term “khadi” entered nationalist vocabulary and the cloth became a key visual symbol of India’s struggle from colonial rule.

The effectiveness of khadi as a visual symbol of the Indian freedom struggle cannot be understood without examination of the critical role played by M. K. Gandhi (known by many as Mahatma – Great Soul) in elevating it to the status of a national cloth imbued with quasi-sacred properties. Gandhi’s success lay in his capacity to pick up, embody and develop existing political and economic critiques of colonialism and rework these through his own clothing practices and through his elaboration of the symbolism of cloth – a simple everyday material form to which people from all backgrounds could relate.

## Gandhi's Sartorial Biography

Gandhi's recognition of the symbolic potential of khadi was born out of a combination of personal experience and growing nationalist awareness. His own clothing changes and experiments are well described in his autobiography<sup>1</sup> and have received considerable attention from scholars.<sup>2</sup> To summarise, as a young man Gandhi was attracted to what he would later call "the tinsel splendours of Western civilization." Like most other elite educated Indian men of his generation, he made considerable efforts to adopt Western dress and manners in public life, associating these with the values of modernity, civilization and progress. At the same time, he experienced the feelings of alienation and discomfort that the adoption of Western clothes often entailed.<sup>3</sup> These feelings became most apparent to Gandhi during his years working as a lawyer and civil rights activist in South Africa (1893 -1914) where he found himself the target of racism in spite of his "civilized apparel". At the same time he was impressed by early nationalist critiques of colonialism in India which attributed India's poverty to the decline of the local textile industry and the mass importation of mill cloth from Europe.<sup>4</sup> A growing disillusionment with Western definitions of civilization and progress combined with experimentations in self-sufficiency, communal living, bodily labour, celibacy and the semiotics of dress – all of which later became important aspects of his social and political crusade in India. By the time he left South Africa in 1914, Gandhi had already learned to weave handloom cloth and had already made public appearances dressed in simple Indian styles of white cotton dress as a means of political protest and identification with oppressed peoples. When he arrived back in India the following year, he staged a dramatic appearance dressed in a white turban, tunic and dhoti, an adaptation of Kathiawadi

peasant dress which visually challenged the well established hierarchies that elevated Western over Indian, urban over rural and elite over popular.

It is easy to underestimate just how radical Gandhi's appearance and clothing policies were. Not only did he challenge long established hierarchies through his own dress but he also proposed a complete re-clothing of the nation as well as a full scale reorganisation of the textile industry. The revival of khadi was central to these aims. To qualify as khadi, cloth had to be not only hand woven and locally produced but also made from hand-spun yarn. It was this stipulation that the yarn must be hand-spun that distinguished Gandhi's promotion of home industry from the efforts of earlier *swadeshi* (home industry) activists in Bengal who had contented themselves with the promotion of Indian produced mill cloth.<sup>5</sup> The difficulty Gandhi had in locating a woman who could teach him to spin is indicative of the extent to which the previously common art of hand spinning had been wiped out though mill technology, although it is likely that it was still practised in some rural areas. It was with Gandhi's spinning experiments, aided by local women in the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, that khadi was reborn as a national cloth. By 1918 Gandhi was wearing what he called pure khadi and by 1919 he was appealing to all Indians to follow suit and to take a vow of *swadeshi*.

#### From Rustic Robes to Sacred cloth

To Gandhi khadi was more than simply cloth. It was the material embodiment of an ideal. It represented not only freedom from the yoke of colonialism, but also economic self sufficiency, political independence, spiritual humility, moral purity,

national integrity, communal unity, social equality, the end of untouchability and the embracing of non-violence. The spinning wheel was, he argued, the new weapon in the fight for *swaraj* (home rule). Through spinning their own yarn, Indians could regain their autonomy just as by wearing khadi, they would not only struggle for independence but also experience the state of being independent. At the same time the revival of hand spinning would, he felt, usher in the revival of a more general craft based society built around the notion of self sufficient village republics.

The power of khadi as a national symbol lay in the fact that since everyone wore some form of clothing, everyone had the opportunity or, as Gandhi saw it, the duty to participate in the freedom movement by embracing khadi. And since this was traditionally the dress of peasant, artisan and tribal rather than the Indian elite, its potential wearers were in theory as numerous and varied as the Indian population itself. To this extent khadi was a powerful visual tool in the creation of an imagined national community which for the first time incorporated the non-literate majority.<sup>6</sup> Khadi and the *charka* (spinning wheel) were also to forge the previously missing links between the personal and the political, thereby encouraging a new range of actors on the political stage. Many women, previously alienated from main stream social and political movements, lent their support to the khadi campaign, taking “vows of *swadeshi*” and donating their jewellery for social and political causes.<sup>7</sup> This was a broad-based political and social movement that incorporated people of all ages, including children.

It was through a combination of Gandhi’s passion and existing economic and political strategies that the Congress Party placed khadi at the centre of the Non-cooperation

campaign of 1920-21 and the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930. These included boycotts on the import and sale of foreign cloth and the staging of public bonfires in which foreign cloth and clothes were burned and participants re-clothed themselves in simple white khadi garments which, Gandhi argued, represented self sacrifice, purity and service of the nation. In using such highly charged symbolic language Gandhi was playing on existing semi-dormant “magical” and “moral beliefs” concerning the polluting potential of cloth, but he reversed conventions, attributing purifying properties to humble khadi rather than fine luxury silks and mill cloth.<sup>8</sup> Gandhi’s insistence that European clothes were dirty, defiling our greatest outward pollution came under attack from those who felt he was in danger of reviving harmful and backward notions of untouchability.<sup>9</sup>

Central to the infrastructure through which khadi was propagated was the All India Spinners Association which organised khadi tours throughout the country, replete with exhibitions, sales of cloth and demonstrations of spinning. These not only stimulated the spread of a shared visual culture but they also combined politics with entertainment in significant ways.<sup>10</sup> In particular the new technology of lantern slides contributed to the visual spectacle, attracting mass audiences from rural communities.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, at the political centre, the Congress Party adopted khadi as its official uniform, placing the image of the spinning wheel at the centre of the national flag (which was, of course made from khadi cloth), and even accepting Gandhi’s controversial proposal that every Congress member should spin for half an hour a day.<sup>12</sup> Within a few years of his arrival back from South Africa Gandhi had effectively transformed the visual culture of Indian politics. White khadi cloth became a powerful presence in public protests, creating an image of visual unity as

well as a sense of shared community in the struggle for freedom for *swaraj* (self-rule). Gandhi's invention of a small white khadi cap (which later became known as the Gandhi cap) represented an explicit attempt to create a single unifying piece of headwear that would be accessible to all Indian men and boys, thereby downplaying existing sartorial diversity on the basis of region, religion, social status and occupation.<sup>13</sup>

Converting the nation to khadi was, however, an ambitious quest that was only ever partially achieved. Indian clothing practices were highly diversified according to caste, religion, occupation, education and region as well as politics. Not all agreed with Gandhi's particular vision of a future India built around the notion of self-sufficient village republics with the spinning wheel occupying a central place.. Prominent amongst Gandhi's critics was the "untouchable" leader Babasahib Ambedkar who perceived the promotion of khadi as a means of keeping the poor in poverty. Many were dubious about the benefits of a return to hand-spinning, arguing that its demise was part of the natural progress that came with development. Amongst those high profile public figures who verbalised their criticisms was Rabindranath Tagore who suggested that "if man be stunted by big machines, the danger of his being stunted by small ones should not be lost sight of."<sup>14</sup> Others complained that spinning was women's work and that it was a laborious and repetitive activity.<sup>15</sup>

Uniting religious groups through khadi was also a difficult task. Whilst some Muslims did support the khadi campaign, others were no doubt alienated by the explicit Hindu imagery of much of Gandhi's rhetoric. A closer look at the clothing practices of different groups reveals that social and religious differences were not entirely wiped

out. Rather different groups found ways of expressing difference through khadi, sometimes by dyeing it,<sup>16</sup> making garments in particular styles or wearing particularly fine varieties of cloth. Hand woven cloth made from handspun silk and wool were also developed and referred to as “khadi silk” and “khadi wool”. Fine hand spun hand woven cottons and silks, though conforming to definitions of khadi, did of course distance their wearers from the rural poor who, if they could afford khadi at all, were likely to be dressed in the thicker weaves.

The problem of poor people’s access to khadi was something that haunted Gandhi throughout the khadi campaign. The mass export of raw cotton to Europe had meant that cotton was in short supply in India where handspun thread competed in the market place with cheap imported machine spun yarn and mill cloth. This meant that obtaining raw cotton or hand spun thread was difficult and costly, making it beyond the reach of many of India’s rural poor. This economics of khadi was a cause of constant frustration to Gandhi who recognised that many of the rural poor simply could not afford to discard their foreign cloth in favour of khadi. Gandhi’s decision to adopt a short dhoti or loincloth in 1921 was partly a response to this situation. For two years he had been preaching that it were better for people to reduce their clothing to a mere loincloth made of khadi than to wear more ample garments made from foreign cloth but he felt that his words did not hold weight as long as he himself was fully dressed. It was the plight of the poor combined with what he considered the failure of the khadi campaign that finally drove him to reduce his own clothing, initially on a temporary basis “as a sign of mourning” that swaraj was still far off and as means of “making the way clear” for those who could only afford a minimum quantity of khadi. As Gandhi grew into his loincloth, it became a permanent feature of his identity,

codifying his principals and priorities, visually evoking and enacting India's poverty whilst simultaneously suggesting its solution through khadi. Whilst the subtleties of what Gandhi wished to evoke were often misunderstood, his humble appearance had a profound impact on his followers both in India and abroad.<sup>17</sup>

*(Though written as an adversary of state power, he was not above using it to further the cause of Khadi. As he says in his essay 'Ministers' Duty' [Harijan April 28 1946], "each Provincial Government has to tell the villagers that they must manufacture their own khaddar.....The Governments should notify the villagers that they will be expected to manufacture khaddar for the needs of their villages within a fixed date after which no cloth would be supplied to them.")*

### Khadi post Independence

Whilst khadi represented a powerful symbolic challenge to British imperialism, Gandhi's dream that it would become the everyday dress of Indians after Independence was never realised. Even during the freedom struggle many had worn it more for its political effectiveness than for love of the cloth, just as many had spun their own yarn more out of self sacrifice and national duty than out of belief in the economic and moral benefits of hand-spinning. However, having played such a significant role in nationalist politics and in India's self-definition, khadi could be neither abandoned nor forgotten.

In politics it has retained its place as national dress in spite of the fact that today the white khadi worn by politicians is associated more with hypocrisy and corruption than sincerity or purity. The image of the khadi-clad politician has long been a favourite

with cartoonists for whom it functions as a visual shorthand for greed and insincerity in the recognisable guise of honour and humility. This has led Chakrabarty to ask why Indian politicians continue to wear khadi given the ubiquity of its negative associations. They do so, he suggests, because even if Indians no longer hold Gandhian ideals, they have retained the desire for an alternative modernity and it is this desire that khadi continues to represent even as people's lives are increasingly informed by capitalism.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly when artists, academics and social activists choose to wear khadi, their distance from the white-clad politician is generally marked by their choice of coloured and flecked weaves or by the particular combinations of clothes that they wear. Their khadi wearing is not associated with hypocrisy but rather with the lived reality of an alternative life style, aesthetics and politics. *(for example, among self-professed radicals in university politics.)*

The ambiguous status of khadi in politics is echoed by its ambiguous economic position. In 1956 the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (hereafter KVIC) was established with a view to promoting and developing khadi production and other village industries in rural areas. Despite high levels of Government assistance in the form of grants, rebates and subsidies, the khadi industry has always struggled to sustain itself and had problems selling the goods it produces. The liberalisation and globalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990's has further contributed to khadi's marginalisation. The years 1997-2002 saw a steady decline in khadi production as well as the accumulation of large quantities of unsold stock.<sup>19</sup> How to attract people into working in a labour intensive industry associated more with morality and crafts skills than profit or exciting new technologies remains a difficult challenge. In particular, hand spinning is perceived as an unglamorous activity which offers

appallingly low returns<sup>20</sup> and is pursued principally by poor women from marginal groups in rural areas. None the less the KVIC continues to pursue an expansionist policy and is optimistic that it may be able to provide increased employment in rural areas, thereby stemming the tide of unemployment and migration to cities.<sup>21</sup>

*(is it worth mentioning that almost all Indian towns and cities have so-called 'Khadi Gramudyog Bhawans, including large and chic ones in Delhi, that sell khaddar, along with other products of 'village industries'?)*

How to revive the khadi industry whilst retaining its particular moral and nationalist character remains a challenge that is currently being pursued in several directions. On the one hand the National Institute of Fashion and Technology (NIFT) and National Institute of Design (NID) have been charged with the role of updating khadi and introducing “new and trendy designs” to be taken up by the khadi sector. This strategy of making khadi more desirable by contemporary standards is to be matched by more aggressive marketing strategies, including the promotion of khadi abroad in such countries as the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and South Africa.

Techniques of global capitalism such as e commerce and the registration of khadi as a brand name and geographical indication have also been recommended.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile fashion designers and private companies have for the last two decades flirted with the potential of khadi as fashion. One astute Kolkata based clothing company has, for example, produced a successful range of brightly coloured khadi garments under the brand name Khadder.<sup>23</sup> Whilst labels such as “bio-khadi” and “organic hand-spun cotton” indicate khadi’s entry into the elite global arena of “eco-friendly” capitalism, the development of something called “polyester khadi” by the KVIC reminds us that popular consumers in India are often more concerned with practicality than purity.<sup>24</sup> A development more in tune with Gandhi’s original aim to provide mass employment

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for the rural poor is the Railway Minister's recent decision to replace all linen used on Indian trains with khadi and to consider introducing of khadi uniforms for railway staff. These proposals, though welcomed in some quarters, have been greeted with cynicism in others, with people complaining of khadi's lack of durability, its high maintenance costs and its "stone age" associations.<sup>25</sup>

What the history of khadi's revival in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries reveals is an ongoing tension between capitalist development and a Gandhian-style modernity based on alternative economic and moral principles. Whilst khadi is never likely to become the popular everyday wear that Gandhi hoped it would be, it is likely that it will retain its important symbolic role in providing an alternative vision of modernity and evoking the texture and uniqueness of India's Freedom Struggle.

(2931 words)

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<sup>1</sup> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *An Autobiography or Story of my Experiments with Truth*, Ahmedabad, 1927.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Susan Bean, 'Gandhi and Khadi: The Fabric of Independence' in Jane Schneider and Annette Weiner, eds, *Cloth and Human Experience*, Washington, 1989 and Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*, London, Chicago, 1996, chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>4</sup> Bean, 'Gandhi and Khadi' and Sumit Sarkar, 'The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to non-cooperation, 1905-22' in Ranajit Guha ed, *Subaltern Studies*, 1984, vol. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Sarkar, 'The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy'

<sup>6</sup> Bean, 'Gandhi and Khadi'. Also Lisa Trevedi, 'Visually Mapping the "Nation": Swadeshi Politics in Nationalist India, 1920-1930', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 62, no. 1, 2003, pp. 11-41.

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- <sup>7</sup> Emma Tarlo, *From Empire to Emporium: Khadi and the Robes of Independence*, Delhi, pp. 14-15.
- <sup>8</sup> Christopher Bayly, 'The Origins of Swadeshi (home industry): Cloth and Indian Society' in Arjun Appadurai ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge, 1986.
- <sup>9</sup> Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, p.92.
- <sup>10</sup> Trevedi, 'Visually Mapping the "Nation."'
- <sup>11</sup> Trevedi, 'Visually Mapping the "Nation."'
- <sup>12</sup> Tarlo, *From Empire to Emporium*, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>13</sup> For details of the invention of the Gandhi cap, see Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, pp. 82-86.
- <sup>14</sup> Cited in Shashi Ahluwalia, *Tagore and Gandhi: The Gandhi Tagore Controversy*, Delhi, 1981.
- <sup>15</sup> For details of resistance to khadi, see Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, chapter 4.
- <sup>16</sup> For example, volunteers in the Chauri Chaura district wore geru (yellow) khadi which distinguished them from non-Gandhians who wore white, see Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory, Chauri Chaura 1922-1992*, Delhi, 1995. There is also evidence of women dying their khadi saris orange as a symbol of renunciation and of Muslims wearing green khadi, see Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, pp. 110-114
- <sup>17</sup> For a summary of Gandhi's motivations for wearing a loincloth and public interpretations of Gandhi's appearance, see Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, pp. 71-82.
- <sup>18</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Clothing the political man: a reading of the use of khadi/white in Indian public life' in *Postcolonial Studies*, 2001, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 27-38.
- <sup>19</sup> Government of India, *The Tenth Year Plan 2002-07*, chapter 5.4, Khadi and Village Industries.
- <sup>20</sup> SRUTI (Society for Rural, Urban and Tribal Initiative), *India's Artisan's: A Status Report*, 1995, p. 36.
- <sup>21</sup> *Tenth Year Plan*.
- <sup>22</sup> Government of India, Popularising Khadi, , Press Information Bureau 2000 (<http://pib.nic.in/feature/feyr2000/fnov/fl51120001.html>)
- <sup>23</sup> *The Hindu*, Business Line, Monday April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2004.
- <sup>24</sup> The KVIC avoids accusations that it is promoting fake khadi by classifying "polyester khadi" as a "village industry" rather than as "khadi." Its advantage is that it is longer lasting and easier to maintain.
- <sup>25</sup> For an online discussion concerning the Railway Minister's proposals, see Indian Railways – Discussions Board ([www.irsuggestions.org/asplstthread1](http://www.irsuggestions.org/asplstthread1)). For discussion of some of the practical difficulties involved, see *The Hindu* Business Line, 7<sup>th</sup> July 2004.