

The Relevance of 'Swadeshi'

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In the search for an alternative path of economic de-velopment, Gandhi's concept of swadeshi remains extremely important.

For Gandhi a buyer in need of a product should not enter the market merely to maximise his satisfaction. Instead he should be guided to a large extent by social responsibility. He unhesitatingly extorted people again and again to buy khadi and support it, ignoring questions such as coarseness or unevenness of the fabric.

In 1934 he wrote : "Then take the question of standardisation. You cannot enforce it in khadi. As Rajagopalachari once remarked, a poor ordinary spinner cannot always spin thread of a uniform quality. She is not a machine. Today she may be unwell, tomorrow her child may be ill and her mind may be distracted. If you have love for the poor spinner or her child, you will not insist on having smooth, even thread always, but be satisfied with what she can give, so long as she gives her best in the condition in which she finds herself at the moment."

Earlier in 1929 he had declared : "Let it be known that there are million in India who can work at the spinning wheel for eight hours a day, and that it is impossible for them to use all the khadi woven therefrom. It is the bounden duty of good citizens of India to take off the surplus product that is turned out by these brothers and sisters of theirs."

Closely linked to this is the concept of 'Swadeshi'. Literally this means 'my country' but Gandhi used the word in a much broader sense. Explaining this concept he wrote in 1916 : "Swadeshi is that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote. In the domain of economics I should use only things that are produced by my immediate neighbours and serve those industries by making them efficient and complete where they might be found wanting."

Interpreted in this way *Swadeshi* will take India to a stage where every village of India will almost be a self-supporting and self-contained unit, exchanging only such necessary commodities with other villages as are not locally producible.

In 1931 he declared : "A votary of *Swadeshi* will carefully study his environment and try to help his neighbours wherever possible by giving preference to local manufactures even if they are of an inferior grade or dearer in price than things manufactured elsewhere. He will try to remedy their defects, but will not give them up, because of their defects and take to foreign manufactures."

Gandhi explained that the concept of *Swadeshi* did not involve any ill feeling towards foreigners or other related narrow feelings. He wrote in 1923 : "My definition of Swadeshi is well known. I must not serve my distant neighbour at the expense of the nearest. It is never vindictive or punitive. It is in no sense narrow, for I buy from every part of the world what is needed for my growth. I refuse to buy from anybody anything however nice or beautiful, if it interferes with my growth or injures those whom nature has made my first care. I buy useful healthy literature from every part of the world. I buy surgical instruments form England, pins and pencils form Austria, and watches from

Switzerland. But I will not buy an inch of the finest cotton fabric from England or Japan, or any other part of the world, because it has injured and increasingly injures millions of inhabitants of India. I hold it to be sinful for me to refuse to buy the cloth spun and woven by the needy millions of India's paupers and to buy foreign cloth although it may be superior in quality to the Indian hand-spun."

In 1931 he warned : "But even Swadeshi like any other good thing can be ridden to death if it is made a fetish. That is a danger that must be guarded against. To reject foreign manufactures merely because they are foreign and to go on wasting national time and money to promote manufactures in one's country for which it is not suited, would be criminal folly and a negation of the Swadeshi spirit. A true votary of Swadeshi will never harbour ill-will towards the foreigner; he will not be moved by antagonism towards anybody on earth. Swadeshimism is not a cult of hatred. It is a doctrine of self-less service that has its roots in the purest ahimsa, i.e. love."

Swadeshi should be used to support not the products of local mills but that of village industry. In 1926 Gandhi said clearly : "The test of Swadeshi is not the universality of the use of an article which goes under the name of Swadeshi, but the universality of participation in the production or manufacture of such an article. Thus considered mill-made cloth is Swadeshi only in a restricted sense. For in its manufacture only an infinitesimal number of India's millions can take part. But in the manufacture of Khaddar, millions can take part."

He also emphasised the voluntary aspect of *Swadeshi* : "It is believed by some that Swadeshi could be affected by an embargo on foreign imports after the attainment of Swaraj. But that Swadeshi will be no Swadeshi. It will be a virtue practised under compulsion. True Swadeshi is the invulnerable bulwark of the nation and it can only be said to be accomplished if it is practised as a national duty."

Gandhi was very clear that the progress of *Swadeshi* and *Khadi* should continue after the end of foreign rule, as these are equally relevant to post-independent India. He wrote in 1947, the year of India's independence : "We were trying through khadi to place man above the machine, rather than allow the machinery driven by electricity or steam, to be the master. We were endeavouring through khadi to establish equality between man and man in place of the enormous inequality now existing between the poor and the rich, between the high and the low, between the man and the woman. We also endeavoured to make the labourer independent of the capitalist instead of the capitalist exploiting labour and assuming undue prestige. If, therefore, what we did in India during the last thirty years was not wrong, we should now carry on the programme of the spinning wheel, with all its allied activities with more understanding of all the implications and with greater vigour."□□□