

# Charkha, 'Dear Forgotten Friend' of Widows Reading the Erasures of a Symbol

*In Gandhian discourse, the charkha signifies 'decentralisation against centralised production', 'the sole remedy' for the dwindling handloom industry and the traditional sector in general. However, away from this, images of this popular symbol, and Gandhian 'swaraj' acquired various shapes in the domain of political culture. The attempt here is to write a history of the spinning wheel with reference to strategies of gender politics that went into the construction of this semiotic space. This reading of erasures of a popular Gandhian symbol contributes to an understanding of the different layers of the politics of disjuncture which operate at many levels.*

**SADAN JHA**

Budhiya'k charkha tanman bhail  
Dhiya puta'k man khan khan bhail  
(Old woman's spinning wheel came into action, children are alarmed)  
— a *Maithili*<sup>1</sup> folksaying.

Every widow I have met has recognised in the wheel a dear forgotten friend.

Its restoration alone can fill the millions of hungry mouths.  
— Mahatma Gandhi, 1921<sup>2</sup>

Symbols and icons travel in history. Along with them travel their meanings, imageries and myths, making the relationship between representation and the subject of representation porous, fluid and dynamic. However, this essay does not seek to trace this network of meanings. I do not intend to construct images of Gandhian nationalism or 'swaraj' mobilising the history of charkha (spinning wheel). I would rather like to restrict my focus only on the symbol, the spinning wheel. In this way, I would be mobilising the history of Gandhian nationalism to write about this Gandhian symbol. Thus, the challenge is to trace the history of this symbol without being totally consumed by the dominant Gandhian ideology.

This is a reading of those narratives that manage to speak the story, their own stories, differently from the one that we have of Gandhism. The attempt is to write a history of the spinning wheel with reference to strategies of gender politics that go into the construction of this semiotic space, and not to aspire for merely another analysis of Gandhian-politics. This essay is a reading of gender stereotypes that developed around the symbol, spinning wheel (charkha) by shifting the point of view away from what Gandhi said to how Gandhian ideologies and symbols were perceived.

### I

In the above mentioned folk saying, the body of old women is placed in opposition to the body of the new generation (children). In fact, on second thoughts, a reading of this couplet seems to reveal three and not merely two sets of oppositional

locations: old woman, new generation and these two sites are mediated by the presence of a third body: the site of the spinning wheel. It is the emergence of the spinning wheel into action that puts two different generations in opposition to each other. The couplet intends to suggest that the old woman is back at work, do not fiddle with her. Here the space of spinning wheel is central to the environment of the old woman. It is this wheel that defines the activity of the old woman.

Invert these oppositional sets and we come face to face with a different layer of relationship among agencies of this narrative. Two generations are actually communicating/connected to each other through the action of spinning wheel. It is actually the body of the spinning wheel that allows the gestural dialogue across the generation possible. The body of the spinning wheel is bridging the generational gap.

There must be various other reading possibilities with this couplet. My reading points to merely two sets of interpretations of spinning wheel as a site, a body. First, the spinning wheel acts as a carrier of certain action and works as a linkage between two bodies/generations/narrative positions. Secondly, the spinning wheel acts as a contested site in itself – a site where the drama of opposition is performed. A site where both old woman and children are making their own claims. Old woman through her action, as the spinning wheel belongs to her space and she enjoys the right to put it in motion. On the other hand, without considering the effect produced by this action (of the wheel) the meaning of the couplet remains incapable of generating any communities of responses. It is the effect that defines the significance of the spinning wheel. Children got alarmed – some kind of order is restored (very mention of the fact that children are alarmed presupposes a state of affairs where children are playful and in some kind of a situation of orderless-ness). Thus, it is the body of the children and their awareness about the active spinning wheel that completes the narrative process, hence this body owns a legitimate say over the body of spinning wheel. The bodies of (aged) woman, young generation, and spinning wheel all participate in the textual

celebration of this couplet. However, the contestation goes on... I try to follow the track...

## Representation and Reading Strategies

The study of representations has received considerable amount of scholarly attention in recent decades. The field of semiotics has witnessed almost a paradigm shift in the last 50 years. While for Heidegger the notion of presence was the destiny of philosophy, for Derrida it is the constant absence of this presence which is at the centre of his idea of deconstruction. The blind spots/ellipses/silences/erasures have come into the foreground and determine the processes of deconstruction of a text or textual field.

Derrida says that 'the structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that 'other' which is 'forever absent'. His 'trace is the mark of the absence of a presence, an always absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience'. To understand this forever absent present he proposes the idea of 'sous rature'. But, his idea of deconstruction is not the construction/reconstruction of these blind spots/ellipses/silences/others/erasures. He says "at each step I was obliged to proceed by ellipses, corrections and corrections of corrections, letting go of each concept at the very moment that I needed to use it, etc".<sup>3</sup> This idea of 'forever absent present' makes disjuncture as one of the most significant aspects in the reading of the symbolic politics.

This reading of erasures of a popular Gandhian symbol, spinning wheel (charkha), not only helps to understand different layers of the politics of disjuncture which operate at different levels, making us more critical towards the dominant interpretations of this textual field (in this case Gandhian discourse), but in the trace of its traces one also comes to know different erased memories of this symbol with enough potential to alter our reading of Gandhism. Long back these memories were worked out and included in Gandhian politics. However, these traces ('everyday' use) of the symbol remained active outside the domain of Gandhian ideological framework and constantly redefined this framework itself.

## Spinning Wheel (Charkha)

"For me", Mahatma Gandhi once wrote, "nothing in the political world is more important than the spinning wheel".<sup>4</sup> The spinning wheel (charkha), for Mahatma Gandhi was not just a tool of political emancipation but it was a metaphor of 'ancient work ethics' and a symbol of economic and social reaction to the British rule. This 'ancient work ethics' and the goal of the 'swaraj' (self-rule) in Gandhian framework had to be mediated in and through the 'daily life'. For him, 'it is in the daily life where dharma and practicality come together' and, spinning wheel was the realisation of this possibility. Thus any study of Gandhism needs to bring into focus this metaphor of 'ancient work ethics', this site of 'daily life' and this symbol of social and economic reaction.

In Gandhian discourse, spinning wheel signifies 'decentralisation against centralised production', 'the sole remedy' for the dwindling handloom industry in particular and India's traditional sector in general, a weapon for stopping the import of foreign goods, the only solution for hidden-mass unemployment of rural population and last but not least 'a dear forgotten friend of Indian widow'. The significance of the spinning wheel can be seen in Mahatma Gandhi's insistence that "India as a nation can live and die only for the spinning wheel."<sup>5</sup>

However, away from what Gandhiji believed and wanted people to believe it is equally significant to analyse the ways in which images of this popular symbol, spinning wheel and Gandhian 'swaraj' acquired various shapes in the domain of political culture and construct 'communities of responses'. These 'communities' are varied and made up of perceptions, practices and myths that developed in the domain of 'people' over the years.

## I Gender Constructs and Gandhi's Unique Position

Historians of Gandhian studies have informed us that strategies of gender function in quite unusual ways in Gandhian discourse. It is this specificity of Gandhian position, which has remained a motivational force for the scholars to delve deep into the gender dynamics from Gandhian perspective. Madhu Kishwar writes,

Gandhiji's responses to women are important for an understanding of his general social view on women not only because he more than any other leader tried to live his personal life publicly, but also because many of his experiments which most people consider eccentricities and obsessions are inextricably linked to his vision of new types of relationships between men and women.<sup>6</sup>

He is also important for feminist scholars because, unlike 19th century social-religious reformers, Mahatma Gandhi did not view women as an object of reform, he saw them as active subjects. In the language of Madhu Kishwar, 'Gandhi's Sita' was no helpless creature'.<sup>7</sup>

In psychoanalytical treatments, the unique position of Gandhiji lies in the manner in which he inverted western notions of sexuality and other socio-psychological codes.<sup>8</sup> Mahatma Gandhi in his attitude and political stands always aspired to be a woman instead of man. Ashis Nandy argues that as a typical representative of the Indian psyche, Mahatma Gandhi 'had always feared womanhood and either abnegated femininity or defensively glorified it out of all proportion.' He further writes,

Gandhi attacked the structure of sexual dominance as a homologue of both the colonial situation and the traditional social stratification. Gandhi was trying to fight colonialism by fighting the psychological equation which a patriarchy makes between masculinity and aggressive social dominance and between femininity and subjugation. In other words, defiant subject-hood and passive resistance to violence – militant non-violence, as Erick Erickson calls, became in the Gandhian world view an indicator of moral accomplishment and superiority, in the subjects as well as in the more sensitive rulers who yielded to non-violence. Honour, he asserted, universally lay with the victims and not the aggressors.<sup>9</sup>

By and large it seems that there is a general agreement among scholars that an understanding of Gandhi's concepts of gender can't be properly and adequately acquired from borrowed paradigms of first world gender discourses. This is also because Gandhi openly and vehemently denied his own masculine image. He aspired for those images and attributes which are commonly attached with feminine identity.<sup>10</sup>

This position of Gandhi was quite intuned with the Indian notion of 'ardhnariswar' in which male and female are not two separate bodies/categories but both are in fact one single body. Both femininity and masculinity coexist in a single body (in 'Samkhya' philosophy the duality has been explained in terms of 'purush' and 'prakriti'). Gandhi always aspired for the feminine self both in his body and in his politics. This yearning for

the womanhood disturbs the modernist discourse of gender in which the male position is always hailed as a superior status.

However, at the level of scholarly treatment, it appears to me that 'Mahatmaship of Gandhiji' has hegemonised readings of gender politics in Gandhian discourse. This means that a superior position of Gandhi has been taken for granted while discussing gender politics in this discourse. This is also due to the fact that almost all-recent studies on gender relationship in Gandhian discourse have been written from Gandhian point of view only.<sup>11</sup> These writings have either used Gandhi as a reference point or scholars have used one or another aspect of Gandhian philosophy regarding women, as entry point(s) into the discourse of popular culture of colonial period. The notion of celibacy is one such case. Exploring the relationship between celibacy, sexuality and nationalism, Joseph S Alter writes, "Gandhi's mass appeal was partly effected on a visceral level at which many Hindu men were able to fully appreciate the logic of celibacy as a means to psychological security, self-employment and national reform...The nationalism which emerges out of this discourse is of an oblique and somewhat utopian sort...Scholars have pointed out that Gandhian treatment of male-female relationship led to the construction of an androgynous politics. The notion that one could become powerful by dominating others – sexually or physically – was anathema to Gandhi."<sup>12</sup>

At another popular level, scholars have always seen Gandhi and his concern for women's cause either from contemporary feminist or gender point of view, or they have sought a kind of remedy for contemporary gender-social problems in Gandhian discourse. Both these treatments have helped in the construction of one-another gender stereotypes. What is missing in these studies is the scope of posing the simple looking question, how did these Gandhian notions themselves act as locations of the struggle for domination and resistance? Thus what matters is not the question of, how did he visualise male, female relationship but also, how was he being perceived and how did his ideas regarding gender relationships take shape in the domain of popular culture?

One of my tasks is to explore how gender stereotypes did develop one upon another in discourses on spinning wheel and how popular culture was partially read and acted upon. Gender appears no more as a pre-category in identity construction, rather it appears as a form of power, a kind of strategy, channel for the construction and reconstruction of political claims and political categories themselves. Thus the study of representations and images appear to be crucial in understanding the networks of power operating simulataniously at various locations in this textual field.

I have also tried to raise the most obvious looking question: how did women, who were day to day practitioners of Gandhism, perceive this Gandhian symbol?

### III

#### The Context: Selecting the Dominant Peasant Stereotype

In the *Goraksha Vijay*, a medieval text by Shaikh Fazlullah, one 'jogin' (women folk of 'yogi' caste) tries to seduce Gorakhnath, a famous saint. She proposes marriage to the saint and tells him,

'kati mu chikan suti, tumi bumiba dhoti;

*hate te niba ye bechibaar*'.<sup>13</sup>

(...I will spin fine cloth and you will make finer dhote and then will sell that in the 'haat', village fair.)

In peasant societies (of India), spinning was primarily a women's job, while weaving was done by the male. But one finds a reversal

of these roles in tribal societies. In tribal societies male members of a family perform the spinning job while women weave the threads into cloth. This work division along gender line is both an outcome as well as a defining agency (producing its own cultural stereotypes) of the culture that produces this narrative.

Recent works have shown that weaving, weaver's looms or the weaving techniques are not merely modes of cloth production. Roy Dilley in his study of Tukolor loom of Senegal has shown the interplay of myths, traditional beliefs and rituals at work in the weaving space, the weaver's loom.<sup>14</sup> In Indian context, Deepak Mehta in his study of the community of Muslim weavers of Barabanki (Uttar Pradesh) has analysed that 'the technique of making cloth and quilts is constituted within a semiotic system'.<sup>15</sup> He explores the body of weaver as the site where both verbal and non-verbal actions are embodied and disembodied. On the other hand, Katherine S Marsh in her study of Tamang culture of Nepal compares the cultural act of weaving with that of writing.<sup>16</sup> She tells us that 'these two acts are gender symbols not only because they tell the Tamang about the separate roles of sexes, but also because they are about what transpires between the sexes as each define the other. Two opposing conceptions of the world emerge as Tamang men and women view one another'.<sup>17</sup>

These studies have helped me to see the space of spinning wheel not just as a political symbol but essentially as a cultural representational arena, which has been utilised and reworked along political, national and gender lines. The act of political recodification of spinning wheel by Gandhi did not wash out its cultural meanings, rather this act of political (re)codification and appropriation, in a way expanded and enhanced its cultural value. Deriving its life spirit from the culture of the land, processes of assigning specific political meanings into an ordinary everyday metaphor of Indian life had a close dialogue with its earlier contextual sites at each and every level throughout the period of anti-colonial movement. Thus, the people, culture and narratives of traditions acted both as sources to and fields of Gandhian discourse.

These sources and these fields retained the legacies of dominant gender constructs of their old cultural contexts even when they underwent various processes of recodification after entering into Gandhian discourse.<sup>18</sup>

In order to understand the politics of recodification it is necessary to look briefly into the historical context in which the spinning wheel, weaving and the whole semiotic field around cloth entered into nationalist discourse. This context was highlighted by the Swadeshi movement of 1905-07. Colonialism and its impact on the yarn sector, the vulnerable position of the weaver (with the dependence over imported fabric) and search for popular symbols to resist exploitative colonial structures are few subtexts where economic historians have debated fiercely. I do not enter into this debate here but, the search for popular symbols at this historical juncture needs to be touched briefly. The *Amrit Bazaar Patrika*, a leading voice of the time, wrote in an editorial of November 1, 1907, "we have urged to spin our own thread, so long we cannot honestly say that we have abjured foreign cotton fabrics. And the charkha (spinning wheel) is the best means for helping in this manner... If every householder makes the thread required for clothing his family, then we can be independent of Manchester without practically any effort on our part".<sup>19</sup> A contemporary play ends up with village women going back to the charkha with gusto.<sup>20</sup> In *Dhorai Charitmanas*, charkha, has been referred to as sudarshan chakra.<sup>21</sup> However, Sumit Sarkar has pointed out that during the swadeshi movement propagation of the charkha bore little fruit at the popular front. It had to wait

for the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian politics. What is significant here is the opening up of a semiotic space in the political culture of the land. C A Bayly writes,

...not only the context of consumption and the soul of the consumer but the quality of country cloth itself attracted attention during these years (swadeshi). The cheaper country cloths had been regarded as rough, homely, perhaps even slightly dirty, whereas British cloths had a reputation for fineness and purity.

Popular singers, actors and preachers made strenuous efforts to reverse these stereotypes, directing their message to women in particular. Some rumours circulated to the effect that British cloth, which had been dyed with unknown chemicals, was actually unclean (imported sugar was rumoured to be impregnated with cow fat). At the same time, the very homeliness and loose, thick weave of village cloth were lauded for their naturalness, purity and lack of sophistication, which here became a term of opprobrium. Village songs of the 1905-10 period associated country cloth with images of motherhood, with thick white rice and curd and with good things of unpolluted countryside.<sup>22</sup>

After the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi, at the popular level the charkha made a radical difference in terms of the attitude of the common folk regarding their own life and well-being. This difference can be seen on the issue of migration and its social responses in folklore. Citing the example of migration, Gyan Pandey has written that in pre-colonial period, mass migration was an emergency remedy in the situations of crisis and it was a natural method, a weapon of protest against the tyranny of local landowners. But, in the latter decades of the 19th century, the wholesale migration of a community, to escape from oppression and a collective act of protest had been transformed into an individual act of desperation.<sup>23</sup> The folklore of the Bhojpuri region captures some of the hopes and travails that arose out of this transformation.

'Poorab ke deshwa men kailee nokaria te kare  
sonwan ke rojigar jania ho'.

(One who gets a job in the east can fill his house with gold.)<sup>24</sup>

This folklore is not just a statement of the shift of occupation (from agriculture or weaving to petty jobs and wage labour) but it is also a narrative of the protest. One can see an element of contrast between this narrative of protest and the following narrative of appeal which has been composed around the text charkha. In one of the Bhojpuri gramgeet women folk sing,

'ab ham katabi charakhaba piya mati jahu bideshwa.

*Ham katabi charkha sajan tuhu jaab mili ahi se surajabaa, piya mati...*<sup>25</sup>

(now I shall ply the charkha O dear, please don't go to alien lands O dear, I shall ply charkha and we shall attain swaraj, O dear don't go...)

Both these narratives resist the dislocations caused by colonialism but in the charkha geet it has been claimed that the act of spinning can reverse the whole process of dislocation. Thus while the hidden aspect of the text attacks colonialism and its evil effects the speech part, the overt text conveys hopes of a golden future.

In another folk song the appeal acquires more confidence and we hear the talk of turning the world upside down with the spinning wheel:

'sakhi sab mili charkha chalabahu jug paltabahu he'<sup>26</sup>

(O dear friends! ply the spinning wheel and turn the world upside down.)

The reference is too innocent, almost mythical, creating highly non-authoritarian appeals about the power of spinning wheel. The mythical hope, playfulness associated with the ideal golden

future ('ramrajya') and the rhythmic lyrical optimism coming from the humming of the spinning wheel in this maithili/bhojpuri folk song not just widened the field of play for Gandhian politics but it had a tendency to even politicise the most mundane moments of everyday life (of womenfolk in particular). Unlike the previous example, in the following couplet the claim made over the body of a prostitute is quite visible and power is almost at the surface.

'Hukum Gandhi ka sar ankho pe bajana hoga  
Randiyon ab tumko bhi charkha chalana hoga'<sup>27</sup>

(The order of Gandhi will have to be followed  
Prostitutes now you too will have to ply the spinning wheel)

Here the body of the prostitute and her participation has been claimed rather than requested. Their consent has been taken for granted. Although there may be various ways of reading this couplet it is quite obvious that the body of prostitutes, in these lines, is something which impeccably belongs to the Gandhian nationalism and hence to the nation.

#### IV Challenging Colonial Myths, Creating New Mythology

Partha Chatterjee writes, "In its specific historical effectivity, Gandhism provided for the first time in Indian politics an ideological basis for including the whole people within the political nation. In order to do this, it quite consciously sought to bridge even the most sanctified cultural barriers that divided the people in an immensely complex agrarian society."<sup>28</sup>

Various new metaphors were added to the spinning wheel in order to colonise the day to day life of Indian people. This language revolved around Gandhi's notion of Swaraj and he placed the spinning wheel at the centre of it. For example, he once called Darbhanga, a town in north Bihar as 'modern pilgrimage centre' because it was one of the major centres for khadi production.<sup>29</sup> There is no lack of evidence when Gandhi linked khadi with religious ethics and sentiment. He often tried to legitimise his programme or his notions of khadi by making the material stand for piety or spirituality. These acts of recodification not only extended the field of power but also redefined the field of politics itself.

Gandhi discarded the notion of politics as a distinct category both at the level of ideology and action. The other side of this rhetorical refusal of politics (when he brought together politics with religion) was the impulse to invest politics everywhere. Gandhi believed that politics does not take place in a defined sphere, it tends to invade everyday life instead. 'Politics encircle us today like the coil of a snake', Gandhi once said.

A particular gendered positioning of the spinning wheel that we commonsensically find in Gandhian treatment of the spinning wheel is also because of the fact that Gandhi's wheel was primarily taken from peasant cosmology.

It appears that Gandhian model of cloth production, in which women are assigned the job of hand spinning and the men are weavers, was based only on peasant version of cloth production. Gandhi popularised this peasant (dominant) version of cloth culture and as a result, various gender-cultural stereotypes emerged in which spinning was primarily recognised as woman's concern.

Having said this one must also remember that for Gandhi, spinning was important equally for both men and women and he advocated the utility of spinning without acknowledging any difference along gender line.<sup>30</sup> Yet, the way in which women subjects were assigned privileged positions in the political

vocabulary developed around the spinning wheel tells its own story. This is a story where a close association between the female body and the body of the spinning wheel is both established and targeted. An excerpt from Gandhi's writings can be helpful to understand the imageries of this language. On 'sisters of Punjab' he wrote,

They (sisters of Punjab) sing sweet songs in chorus, and those songs are also historical. Thousands of Punjabi sisters have the story of Dyerism by heart through these songs. In the art of spinning the sisters of Punjab today beat their other sisters in the country and I believe they will always do so. Two daughters of a barrister competed with me on the spinning wheel. My hands simply would not function. As I lengthened a yarn, it would snap. These girls just went on and on. I felt abashed. I had confessed the defeat at the very beginning. The father consoled me and said that my spinning wheel must have been defective. But the consolation was unavailing since I knew my ignorance well enough. The music that issued from the spinning wheels of these girls sounded to me sweeter even than that of a fine musical instrument. This battle of spinning wheels began at 11 o'clock at night but, if I had not some other works to attend to, I would certainly have gone watching the turning of the spinning wheels, for my faith that India's swaraj will be won through this spinning wheel grow day by day.<sup>31</sup>

Looked at from another vantage point and at a different textual location, following folksong shows how *khadi* worked as a carrier of Gandhian ideology, how Gandhian gender norms were internalised by rural women and, the manner in which various communities of responses associated with social sexual positions came into play in the conflict between private and the public.

I will not wear foreign cloth,  
The words of my darling call out.  
I will fight rather than give in  
Because wearing such thin cloth in the Ganges to bathe  
when I am wet in the Ganges, my body will show shamefully.<sup>32</sup>

"This song, sung in Maithili in north Bihar and in Magahi in south Bihar, represents a man hearing the words of his sweetheart. Strikingly, however, the song was sung by women spinning or marching at cloth stores – it characterised a gender inversion of women singing the part of men and joining men in the movement".<sup>33</sup> However, when put in proper cultural context this narrative reveals another layer of politics. The metaphorical and cultural occasions referred in the above mentioned folk song is that of bathing in open, bathing in the Ganges. In order to understand the politics of this specific folk song and images of Gandhian philosophy that is inbuilt into it let me briefly discuss the cultural contexts that shapes circles of meanings around this folksong.

The concept of 'Ganga-snaan' (sacred dip in holy Ganga) is a popular and easily affordable pilgrimage for almost all sections of 'maithil' (those who live in the region of Mithila) people. It is recognised as a sacred bathing of very high esteem in the religious culture of the region. However, there are various popular perceptions of this 'Ganga-bathing'. This pilgrimage like any others, has been viewed as an occasion when women 'enjoy open air'. Thus the practice itself has been recognised as a grave threat to the dominant gender codes, especially codes related with the domestication of female subjects. One of the folk-tales of Gonu Jha conveys this social-gender threat.<sup>34</sup>

In this story, the wife of Gonu Jha asks permission to go to Simaria-ghat – the place where people from this region go for the sacred dip. Initially, the husband, Gonu Jha gives her this permission but on the day of journey he and his brother stand at the doorway so that she cannot go outside the house. When the wife questions this act, he tells, what is the use of going for

'Ganga-snaana'! Women go there only to enjoy and experience the mob and crowd. This experience, we are providing you in the house itself.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to trace the historicity lineage of this folktale, neither can we trace the historical pedigree of this folk personality – Gonu Jha. Yet, in folktales and in real life of Mithila this folk figure has been identified as real historical personality. It is also significant to note here that there is a remarkable similarity between this folk tale, its message of 'social-gender threat', the above-mentioned Gandhian song and one of the kabitta (couplets) of Kabir, the famous jolaha (weaver):

*chali hai kulborni Ganga nahai.  
satuba karain bahuri bhunjain, ghunghat ote bhaskat jai.  
gathari baandhin motri bandhin, khasam ke mure dihin dharai.  
bichua pahirin auntha pahirin, lat khasam ke marin dhai.  
ganga nahain jamuna nahainau nau man mail lihin chadhai.  
panch pachis kai dhakka khain, gharahu ki punji aai gawanai.  
kahat kabir heta kar guru soun, nahin tor mukuti jai nasaain.*<sup>35</sup>

(after destroying her family she is going for the holi Ganga dip. With "satua"<sup>36</sup> (ready to eat gram-flour, very popular in the peasant culture of north India, particularly in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar), her face is getting exposed, she has prepared a gathri (a bundle) and a motri (baggage). With all her ornaments over her body she kicks off her husband. She takes bath in the Ganga and Yamuna and she carries tons of dust. She is getting the rough of the crowd and losing even the saved wealth. Kabir tells, love thy guru, the only way of salvation.)

The earlier mentioned Gandhian song moves around the concepts of shame and decency, modesty and protection from male gaze (as this is addressed to the husband). The motive is to prove the loyalty to husband. At the same time, it is addressed to other women folks and thus acts as a propagating agency of dominant gender codes. The sub-text of this song is composed around fineness and coarse nature of cloth. The song glorifies the 'weakest' aspect of khadi cloth – its coarse quality and its ability to transform 'weakness' into strength of cloth by imposing prevalent gender codes.

## V

### Weakness as Strength: Inversion of Codes

In this song or in Gandhian narratives in general the thickness of cloth has been hailed as a positive aspect while the fineness has been denounced. Although Gandhi recognised the richness of the Indian weaving tradition he never used this point as a weapon of his attack on colonialism. In fact, Gandhi developed his strategy to counter the power of colonialism precisely around those sites which were criticised and held inferior positions in colonial meta-narrative. He countered the fineness instead with thickness. This reversal of value system is more significant in a culture which has a long and popular history of the production of fine quality yarns and cloths.

Fineness was the hallmark of pre-colonial Indian cloth. In defence of this quality, it is often remarked that once, a queen came to the court wearing seven thans (reams) of Dhaka malmal yet, she failed to cover her nudity. Now, Gandhi inverted the yardstick of this codification. The thickness displaced the space occupied by fineness and sophistication in the value system of cloth and dressing. As has been shown earlier in the reading of Gandhian folk song we find that what is also crucial here is that this nationalist position/desire for thickness simultaneously caters to the interests of the dominant gender.

These song also evokes the picture of the god Krishna, stealing the clothes of bathing damsels (popularly available in visual register, calendar, of this region). This is probably one of the most popular narratives, which acts as a masculine social warning regarding the dangers of women bathing in open. These mythical stories (associated with Krishna) also act as part of the social training for adolescents and warn them about future social dangers.<sup>37</sup> Writing on the socio-psychological role of myths of Krishna, Sudhir Kakkar argues, "In psychological terms, he (Krishna) encourages the individual to identify with an ideal primal self, released from all social and superego constraints. Krishna's promise, like of Dionysus in ancient Greece, is one of utter freedom and instinctual exhilaration."<sup>38</sup> The Krishna myth oscillates between these two poles – at the one end, it acts like a shield from male gaze on the other, it works as a part of socio-sexual training and as a super-ego with which one aspires to associate herself. However, this dualism, in the psychological significance, of myths does not lead to any contradiction; in fact both are complimentary. While these myths act as a safety valve for the dominant social cultural codes, on the other hand, these myths extend a promise of freedom and parity, both social and sexual, to both men and women, indeed often as an even stronger appeal for women given the confined and constrained life that is their lot.<sup>39</sup>

Acting as safety valves, these myths identify those sites that contain dangerous potentialities for dominant masculine norms. The above mentioned folksong is addressed to this social sexual threat. The thick, coarse khadi is used as a shield from outsider's lustful gaze and protects the chastity of women folk. The politics of above mentioned folk song must be seen in the context of other structural restrictions imposed upon the mobility of female subjects. For the upper caste Indian women in north India, there are elaborate invisible codes prescribing every day conducts. The spheres, male and female were highly segregated and there were particular dress codes for domestic as well as outside works. However, the immediate context of this song was slightly different. It was sung by women volunteers at Gandhi ashrams (centres). It is this contextuality, the Gandhian ideology that makes the khadi song so much significant. A close study of the nature of this space of Gandhi ashrams or khadi bhandars (shopping centres) from the gender perspective is also necessary to understand the relationship between long-term cultural context and immediate occasion of the production of this folk song.

## VI

### The Charkha as a Shelter from Patriarchal Tyranny

Gandhi himself never advocated any kind of work division along gender lines but khadi production in fact distinguished the kind of work performed by men and women (this reading is particularly based in north Indian context). Women workers were assigned with the production task and thus pushed into inner sphere while male volunteers were given marketing and other public dealing jobs. However, a crucial outcome of the khadi movement was that ashrams acted as shelters for those courageous women who wanted to escape from the tyranny of patriarchal social structures and norms. The spinning wheel, which symbolised the khadi movement, very soon, became a symbol of self-employment, abolition of *pardah* (culture of veil) and other oppressive social traditions. But the more popular the movement become the more it provided new outlets for rural women with other political agendas.

Janaki Devi of Madhubani district of Bihar joined the movement to avoid a dreaded marriage.<sup>40</sup> Sita Devi of the same place joined the anti-purdah movement and then khadi movement because as a young widow she saw these political alternatives as a means of economic independence from her in-laws' household.<sup>41</sup> Women who did not want to marry or who could not marry found refuge in these ashrams.

Khadi bhandars marked a definite transition from 'social to political' as we conventionally use these concepts ('politics' has been used here as something pertaining to the state). Khadi bhandars were hailed not only as 'social' and thus a 'apolitical' space in the Gandhian discourse, but also as a place of recruitment of volunteers in the fight against colonialism and for the attainment of 'swaraj'. On the other hand in dominant social perceptions these bhandars were seen primarily as a threat to the social moral order and thus constituted a corrupt political location.

This reading of social resistance, male perceptions and women's imagination/resistance in and around khadi bhandar opens up scope for further inquiry on the dynamics of body politic that developed around Gandhi ashrams and khadi bhandars which needs more space and cannot be taken up here.

Wendy Singer, in her work, has noted that gender also influenced the age at which political activism was acceptable. Most women did not join politics until they were married or when their children were old enough to be left in at home. Therefore, while teenage boys began wearing khadi and congregated at khadi centres, women did not begin their political work until they were at least in their 20s and often not until they were old enough to leave the daughter-in-law to manage the household.<sup>42</sup>

However, in the male public sphere, Gandhi ashrams were often perceived as places where social-sexual norms were frequently violated. Women were exposed to male gaze, when at work. On the one hand while, the division of work was along gender lines, women were generally given inside jobs, i e, production tasks, while jobs which demanded direct contact with outsiders were assigned to males only. On the other hand, this politics seems to lose its weight at the time of political demonstrations. Women volunteers came out in public and defied gender norms on other occasions too. Clad in a khadi sari they felt a unique kind of security from male gaze. Their sense of security came from their faith in the pious nature of Gandhian objectives.

However, in the history of a symbol, one needs to problematise this 'sense of security'. In order to unsettle this account one needs to look at the ways in which the culture produced by the Gandhian charkha weaves its own threads. Here, the point of view of those consumers is crucial for whom the Gandhian wheel was brought in the centre of the political frame. Let me briefly place two narrative halts in this history of Gandhian wheel. These two narratives allows us an entry into two different worlds of the spinning wheel.

### From Austerity to Fashion: Narratives of a Fetishised Symbol

In its supplement, 'Folio' featuring 'The Woven Art' in 1999, *The Hindu*, columnist, Gowri Ramnarayan recounts her encounter with her maid servant, Mariamma,

"Inda podavai nallaave illai" (this sari is not at all nice). "Why have you bought it for me?" asked Mariamma, my indispensable home assistant. Perturbed, I looked at the handloom sari, an expensive Diwali gift, its leaf green and chilli red were surely the striking colours she loved. "What's wrong with it" I asked her "Ayyo, Amma!" she exclaimed with infinite contempt, "It is cotton! No use at all". She also told me that she did not like any of the handloom

saris of mine that I give her off and on, because they are “limp and clammy”, not smart and bright like the nylon and polycot the corner house Amma gives her maid. “They may be old, but they look as good as new”, “she ended with a sniff. It was no use explaining to her that cotton was the best wear for our country and climate.”<sup>43</sup>

The problem posed by Gawri Ramnarayan’s narrative has been partially answered by Kavitha Saluja when she says that ‘khadi has never enjoyed an identity of its own. On the contrary it has always changed with the whims and fancies of what the wearer wants to portray. In this context, as Kavitha Saluja puts it, “Khadi is not a fabric, it is a tool in the hand of politician to facilitate patriotic portrayal or in the hands of the elite as an issue of distinct identity and more so with a social worker as a revival episode”.<sup>44</sup>

This populist dimension of the khadi and the charkha programme is also evident in Damyanti Sahgal’s narrative.<sup>45</sup> She is a partition victim and a social worker. Damyanti Sahgal narrates her visit to the Hoshiyarpur rehabilitation camp. She was accompanying Lady Mountbatten. Her narrative reveals the spectacular surface, the show business of the charkha programme.

They had made a lot of arrangements for the visitor. She first looked at the women who were spinning. To visitors they said these women earn quite a lot, some ten rupees a day, and I began to wonder, spinning does not get so much money. If it is ten for spinning, it would mean three hundred for the month. I thought, I came back and told my aunt, and she said you are foolish you should go there? and it was when I saw these documents that I discovered that some women were earning five rupees (a month). What about the time I came for the inspection? They said, that was for the memsaheb. I was shocked: I said to them but you lied so much. They said, no it was not really lies, what we meant was that if a person worked day and night she would earn so much. Twenty-four hours. So it was all show.<sup>46</sup>

Was it a show? It is not that the author of this text of charkha, Mahatma Gandhi was not aware about this fundamental weakness of this spinning wheel programme. He repeatedly warned that the programme was only a supplement to and not a substitute to main work.

These narratives reveal strikingly different standpoints regarding Gandhian khadi programme which was symbolised by the spinning wheel. Apart from texts, chronological frames of these two narratives make them interesting. Although this is not to suggest that these narratives can in any manner be treated as captives of time frames which produce them. This is just to remind that time frames set their own closures and one must not ignore these restrictions while reading these narratives. The first and most obvious question that emerges in Mariamma’s narrative is the very appearance of it. Mariamma’s encounter with Gawri Ramnarayan (I have deliberately reversed the positions of ‘authors’ of this narrative) moves in the sphere of the text of khadi and conservatively speaking does not belong to the domain of the text of the spinning wheel. One can also argue from this perspective that we are reading the text of represented subjects (khadi, Gandhian ideology, programme, etc) and not the representation (spinning wheel) itself. However, a close reading suggests that erasures of the text of the spinning wheel are in operation not just at the level of dialogue between two players (in this case Mariamma and Gawri Ramnarayan) but obviously at the structures in which we read these narratives. It is crucial here to locate blind spots of the text of the spinning wheel at the locations that produce (and thus control) this narrative.

Mariamma’s narrative comes before us from post-colonial locations. This is a part of larger project of critiquing ‘colonial modernist’ mindset which has hegemonised the clothing culture of India. The space and centrality assigned to the response of

a maidservant shows the power and reach of this hegemony. Gawri Ramnarayan uses this occasion of the production of this narrative to remind us that the failure of khadi programme rests in the very context in which recodification of cloth culture took place and in processes in which charkha acquired political meanings in the first two decades of 20th century. We have briefly discussed ways in which nationalisation of the body of the spinning wheel took place and the manner in which the body of the spinning wheel was internalised within Gandhian discourse. We have seen that this internalisation was performed by injecting various markers into the body of spinning wheel and the body of cloth in general. Texts of purity/impurity, pious/profane, tradition/modernity, etc, were propagated at that historical juncture of the anti-colonial struggle to counter the hegemony of cheap and fine mill cloth. At the end of the century, in the dressing mentality of a house maid, Mariamma, we feel that all these markers which were injected into the body of charkha have actually deserted this body.<sup>47</sup>

If we compare the utopian dream of the folk song mentioned earlier – *sakhi sab mili charkha chalabahu jug paltabahu* – with Mariamma’s narrative this aspect of decomposition of Gandhian body of charkha becomes more clear. However, this is not to ignore socio-economic agencies which have contributed significantly in the shift of images of charkha from an agency of the attainment of swaraj to Mariamma’s narrative. In fact the narrative of Damyanti Sehgal gives us a crucial insight into the failure of the whole charkha programme.

Damyanti Sehgal’s narrative is a part of that disillusionment from the practical viability of Gandhian Swaraj. This disillusionment was also responsible for the marginalisation of Gandhian ideology in post-colonial India. On the other hand, Mariamma’s liking for mill made nylon sari is both the cause and consequence of this marginalisation.

These narratives are significant not just because they provide crucial reference points to different developmental paradigms. To me the significance lies in the fact that these narratives are by female subjects and addressed to another female subject. In these narratives women agencies belonging to different positions are speaking on two different aspects of the spinning wheel programme. And both narratives are marked by different sets of erasures. Yet, both these narratives question the spinning wheel as being ‘women’s friend’. What appears obvious and ‘friendly’ from dominant political positions always has a set of hidden histories of textual surprises and sufferings. **EPW**

*Address for correspondence:*

jhasadan@hotmail.com

sadan@sarai.net

## Notes

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- 1 Maithili is the language of Mithila, a geo-cultural region in the north Bihar, India.
- 2 Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol XIX, Delhi, Publication Division, 1976, pp 454-56.
- 3 Cited by Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, ‘Translator’s Preface’ in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, (tr by Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak), Delhi, Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, (1976) 1994, p xviii.
- 4 Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol XIX, Delhi, Publication Division, 1976, pp 454-56.
- 5 Ibid.

- 6 Madhu Kishwar, 'Gandhi on Women', *Economic and Political Review*, vol XX, no 40, October 5, 1985, p 1691.
- 7 Madhu Kishwar writes, "The Sita or Draupaadi of Gandhi was not the commonly accepted lifeless stereotypes of subservience. They were symbols versatile enough to incorporate the qualities that he chose to endow them with. In fact, sometimes, he tended to overburden the symbols with meanings they were ill-equipped to carry. For example, Sita was used as a symbol of swadeshi, to convey an anti-imperialist message. Sita only wore 'cloth made in India' or home-spun and thus kept her heart and body pure. Further more, 'Sita was no slave of Rama'. She was portrayed as being able to say no even to her husband if he approached her carnally against her will. Gandhi's Sita was no helpless creature." *ibid*, p 1691, also see, Madhu Kishwar, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol XX, no 41, October 12, 1985, pp 1753-58.
- 8 Erik H Erikson writes, "Who could deny that Gandhi was 'a man'? But, just because Gandhi was so free in providing us with conflictful memories as well as with confessions of 'unmanly' aspirations, we must be sparing with our interpretations; for in his revealed life the abnormal and supernatural vie with such disarming frankness that whatever we could diagnose as his neurosis simply becomes part of his personal swaraj, the home ground of his being – and a man must build on that. I would add that in such a man, and especially in an innovator, much phallic maleness seems to be absorbed in the decisive wielding of influence – and in a certain locomotor drivenness." He further remarks, "But I wonder whether there has ever been another political leader who almost prided himself on being half man and half woman, and who so blatantly aspired to be more motherly than women born to the job, as Gandhi did." Erik H Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence*, London, Faber and Faber, 1970, pp 401-02.
- 9 Ashis Nandy, *At the Edge of Psychology*, Delhi, OUP, 1980, pp 47-70.
- 10 *Ibid*.
- 11 However, writings coming from post-colonial location have seriously posed a challenge to author-centric discourse. Shahid Amin's 'Gandhi as Mahatma' marks the birth of reader in the text of Gandhian History. See, Shahid Amin, 'Gandhi As Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-22' in Ranjit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies vol III*, OUP, Delhi, 1984, pp 1-61. A recent study by Dipesh Chakrabarty on the use of khadi/white in Indian public life problematises this arena of readership of Gandhian text by bringing the subject of values in post-colonial life as these have been developed around Gandhian imageries. See, Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Clothing the Political Man: A Reading of the Use of Khadi/White in Indian Public Life', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol 4, No 1, 2001, pp 27-38.
- 12 Joseph S. Atler, 'Celibacy, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Gender into Nationalism in North India', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol 53, no 1, February 1994, pp 45-46.
- 13 *Gorakhsa Vijaya*, Calcutta, 1324, p 657, cited by Hazari Prashad Dwivedi, *Kabir*, Rajkamal Prakashan, 1990, p 23.
- 14 Roy Dilley, 'Myth And Meaning and The Tukolar Loom', *Man* (ns), vol 22, 1987, pp 256-66.
- 15 Deepak Mehata, *Work, Ritual, Biography: A Muslim Community in North India*, OUP, Delhi, 1997, p 3.
- 16 Katherine S Marsh, 'Weaving, Writing and Gender', *Man* (ns), vol 18, 1983, pp 729-44.
- 17 *Ibid*.
- 18 See Rudolph and Rudolph: *Modernity of Tradition*, and Shahid Amin, *op cit*. These two readings provide interesting insights into the relationship between Gandhism and its cultural context.
- 19 Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-08*, OUP, New Delhi, 1973, foot note 48, p 103.
- 20 *Ibid*, p 103.
- 21 Sumit Sarkar, 'The Condition of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Cooperation, C 1905-22' in Ranjit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies*, vol III, OUP, 1984, p 276.
- 22 C A Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia: Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India*, OUP, Delhi, 1998, pp 199-200.
- 23 Gyan Pandey, 'Economic Dislocation in Nineteenth Century Eastern Utter Pradesh: Some Implications of the Decline of Artisanal Industry in Colonial India' in Peter Robb (ed), *Rural South Asia, Linkages, Change and Development*, Segment Book Distributors, New Delhi, (year not mentioned), pp 112-13.
- 24 Bhikhari Thakur in Gyan Pandey, *op cit*, p 113.
- 25 'Charkha A Bhojpur Grangeet', Shiva Kumar Mishra (comp and ed), *Azadi ki Shikshayan*, Indian Fertilisers Cooperative, New Delhi, 1998, p 248.
- 26 'Gandhi ke ayal jamana' in Shiv Kumar Mishra (comp and ed), *Azadi Ki Shikshayain*, Indian Fertilisers Cooperative, Delhi, 1998, p 247.
- 27 *Dumkati Sarkar* (Prakashak Ram Govind Misr, Philkhana, Kanpur and Farwari, 1922, P P HIN B 209) cited by Shahid Amin, *Event Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-92*, OUP, Delhi, 1996, end note no 87, p 225.
- 28 Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and The Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, OUP, Delhi, 1986, p 110.
- 29 Cited from *Young India*, 1927-28, p 74 by K K Dutta, *Bihar Main Swatantrata Andolan Ka Itihas*, vol I (tr by), Vishnu Anugraha Narayan), Bihar Hindi Granth Akadami, Patna, 1975, p 494.
- 30 Gandhi was very critical to the antagonistic positions of male vs female. He wrote, "My ideal is this: A man should remain man and yet should become woman. Similarly, a woman should remain and yet become man. This means that man should cultivate the gentleness of woman and woman should cast off their timidity and become brave and courageous" in Raghwan Iyer, *Moral and Political Writings of Gandhi*, vol 3, Oxford University Press, New York, 1986, pp 1-2.
- 31 Mahatma Gandhi, 'My Last Visist to Punjab', *The Collected Works of Gandhi*, vol XIX, Publication Division, Delhi, 1976, p 6.
- 32 Wendy Singer, *Creating Histories; Oral Narratives and the Politics of History Making*, OUP, 1997, pp 230-31.
- 33 *Ibid*.
- 34 Folk tales of Gону Jha are very popular. These stories are very significant element of the oral tradition of Mithila. Unfortunately we do not have any academic work on the Legends of Gону Jha.
- 35 *Kabir bijak*, cited by Hazari Prashad Dwivedi, *Kabir*, *op cit*, p 135.
- 36 People of this region carry satua in the course of journey as a very convenient and ready to eat food. Just add water, a pinch of salt or sugar and it is ready. There is no need of cooking or any elaborate arrangement. Satua is different from another gram flour, besan as the former is made of fried grams while besan is made of raw gram.
- 37 Sudhir Kakkhar, 'The Tales of Love, Sex and Danger', *The Indian Psyche*, OUP, Delhi, 1996, p 142.
- 38 *Ibid*, p 146.
- 39 *Ibid*, p 146.
- 40 Wendy Singer, *op cit*, p 69.
- 41 *Ibid*, p 69.
- 42 "Janaki Devi always considered herself primarily a khadi worker, though she opposed more conservative forms of khadi production that allowed and reinforced pardah. She continued through her school and through personal aid to young women willing to rebel against the standard definitions of womanhood. Her radical departure from the mainstream khadi workers was shaped by her attempt to redefine what was feminine," *ibid*, p 261.
- 43 Gowri Ramnarayan: 'An elitist symbol?'; *The Woven Art, The Folio, The Hindu*, June 20, 1999.
- 44 Kavitha Saluja, 'Swadeshi, Yet Out of Reach', *The Woven Art, The Folio, The Hindu*, June, 20, 1999, p 24.
- 45 Damyanti Sehgal in Urvasi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Viking, 1998, p 125.
- 46 "What kind of economic rehabilitation was this? As long as they were in camp, they would get rations and they could earn a little, some ten rupees or so, but once they went out?...they have no experience? If she puts a spinning wheel or loom at home, what will she do? Here, the moment a thread shapes, the technician is there to help her but else where?...that means no future, nothing?... I used to be very concerned at this. I couldn't sleep for many days?...what am I doing about the real issue. And because basically I am a religious person. I prayed and asked god what I should do. And it was at this time that I began to think of adult education". Damyanti Sehgal in Urvasi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Viking, 1998, p 125.
- 47 This shows the long journey that has been travelled by the popular readings of khadi. Once read as a marker of 'purity' and renunciation it has become 'a uniform of rogue, as something like the hypocritical gesture of one who protests too much, as corruption as thievery. Dipesh Chakrabarty reads the political culture that shapes the meanings of khadi in terms of value systems and zones of engagements 'desired' by 'alternative modernity'. He writes, "It is the site of the desire for an alternative modernity, a desire made possible by contingencies of British colonial rule, now impossible of realisation under the conditions of capitalism and yet circulating insistently within everyday object of Indian public life, the (male) politician's uniform". The evaporation of Gandhian values from the khadi 'would signify the demise of a deeper structure of desire and would signal India's complete integration into the circuits of global capital'. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *op cit*. On the history of khadi as a dress and the politics of clothing see Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and in India*, Viking, Delhi, 1995; and Susan Bean, 'Gandhi and Khadi, the Fabric of Indian Independence' in Annette B Weiner and Jane Schneider (eds), *Cloth and Human Experience*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1980.