

Gandhi's Swadeshi - The Economics of Permanence

by Satish Kumar

Introductory Note:

The teachings of Mahatma Gandhi were powerful enough to play a major role in the nonviolent revolution that overthrew British colonialism in India. They are clearly still of utmost relevance today. Central to Gandhi's philosophy was the principle of 'swadeshi', which, in effect, means local self-sufficiency. Satish Kumar elaborates on this important concept. Kumar is a Gandhian scholar and also a thinker and activist in the tradition of E.F. Schumacher. Born in Bikaner, in Rajasthan, India, Kumar was a Jain monk early in life, then joined the Gandhian movement and later, quite literally, walked around the world. He finally settled in England, where he is now the editor of 'Resurgence' magazine and runs the Schumacher Society, the Schumacher Lecture Series, and Schumacher College. He is also the head of Green Books, an ecologically oriented publishing company.

Mahatma Gandhi was a champion of 'swadeshi', or home economy. [People outside India know of Gandhi's campaigns to end British colonialism, but this was only a small part of his struggle. The greater part of Gandhi's work was to renew India's vitality and regenerate its culture.](#) Gandhi was not interested simply in exchanging rule by white sahibs for rule by brown sahibs; he wanted the government to surrender much of its power to local villages.

For Gandhi, the spirit and the soul of India rested in the village communities. He said, "The true India is to be found not in its few cities, but in its seven hundred thousand villages. If the villages perish, India will perish too." Swadeshi is a program for long-term survival.

Principals of Swadeshi

Gandhi's vision of a free India was not a nation-state but a confederation of self-governing, self-reliant, self-employed people living in village communities, deriving their right livelihood from the products of their homesteads. Maximum economic and political power - including the power to decide what could be imported into or exported from the village - would remain in the hands of the village assemblies.

In India, people have lived for thousands of years in a relative harmony with their surroundings: living in their homesteads, weaving homespun clothes, eating homegrown food, using homemade goods; caring for their animals, forests, and lands; celebrating the fertility of the soil with feasts; performing the stories of great epics, and building temples. Every region of India has developed its own distinctive culture, to which travelling storytellers, wandering 'saddhus', and constantly flowing streams of pilgrims have traditionally made their contribution.

According to the principle of swadeshi, whatever is made or produced in the village must be used first and foremost by the members of the village. Trading among villages and between villages and towns should be minimal, like icing on the cake. Goods and services that cannot be generated within the community can be bought from elsewhere.

Swadeshi avoids economic dependence on external market forces that could make the village community vulnerable. It also avoids unnecessary, unhealthy, wasteful, and therefore environmentally destructive transportation. The village must build a strong economic base to satisfy most of its needs, and all members of the village community should give priority to local goods and services.

Every village community of free India should have its own carpenters, shoemakers, potters, builders, mechanics, farmers, engineers, weavers, teachers, bankers, merchants, traders, musicians, artists, and priests. In other words, each village should be a microcosm of India - a web of loosely inter-connected communities. Gandhi considered these villages so important that he thought they should be given the status of "village republics".

The village community should embody the spirit of the home - an extension of the family rather than a collection of competing individuals. Gandhi's dream was not of personal self-sufficiency, not even family self-sufficiency, but the self-sufficiency of the village community.

The British believed in centralized, industrialized, and mechanized modes of production. Gandhi turned this principle on its head and envisioned a decentralized, homegrown, hand-crafted mode of production. In his words, "Not mass production, but production by the masses."

By adopting the principle of production by the masses, village communities would be able to restore dignity to the work done by human hands. There is an intrinsic value in anything we do with our hands, and in handing over work to machines we lose not only the material benefits but also the spiritual benefits, for work by hand brings with it a meditative mind and self-fulfillment. Gandhi wrote, "Its a tragedy of the first magnitude that millions of people have ceased to use their hands as hands. Nature has bestowed upon us this great gift which is our hands. If the craze for machinery methods continues, it is highly likely that a time will come when we shall be so incapacitated and weak that we shall begin to curse ourselves for having forgotten the use of the living machines given to us by God. Millions cannot keep fit by games and athletics and why should they exchange the useful productive hardy occupations for the useless, unproductive and expensive sports and games." Mass production is only concerned with the product, whereas production by the masses is concerned with the product, the producers, and the process.

The driving force behind mass production is a cult of the individual. What motive can there be for the expansion of the economy on a global scale, other than the desire for personal and corporate profit?

In contrast, a locally based economy enhances community spirit, community relationships, and community well-being. Such an economy encourages mutual aid. Members of the village take care of themselves, their families, their neighbours, their animals, lands, forestry, and all the natural resources for the benefit of present and future generations.

Mass production leads people to leave their villages, their land, their crafts, and their homesteads and go to work in the factories. Instead of dignified human beings and members of a self-respecting village community, people become cogs in the machine, standing at the conveyor belt, living in shanty towns, and depending of the mercy of the bosses. Then fewer and fewer people are needed to work, because the industrialists want greater productivity. The masters of the money economy want more and more efficient machines working faster and faster, and the result would be that men and women would be thrown on the scrap heap of unemployment. Such a society generates rootless and jobless millions living as dependants of the state or begging in the streets. In swadeshi, the machine would be subordinated to the worker; it would not be allowed

to become the master, dictating the pace of human activity. Similarly, market forces would serve the community rather than forcing people to fit the market.

Gandhi knew that with the globalization of the economy, every nation would wish to export more and import less to keep the balance of payments in its favour. There would be perpetual economic crisis, perpetual unemployment, and perpetually discontented, disgruntled human beings.

In communities practising swadeshi, economics would have a place but would not dominate society. Beyond a certain limit, economic growth becomes detrimental to human well-being. The modern worldview is that the more material goods you have, the better your life will be. But Gandhi said, "A certain degree of physical comfort is necessary but above a certain level it becomes a hindrance instead of a help; therefore the ideal of creating an unlimited number of wants and satisfying them, seems to be a delusion and a trap. The satisfaction of one's physical needs must come at a certain point to a dead stop before it degenerates into physical decadence. Europeans will have to remodel their outlook if they are not to perish under the weight of the comforts to which they are becoming slaves."

In order to protect their economic interests, countries go to war - military war as well as economic war. Gandhi said, "People have to live in villages communities and simple homes rather than desire to live in palaces." Millions of people will never be able to live at peace with each other if they are constantly fighting for a higher living standard.

We cannot have real peace in the world if we look at each other's countries as sources for raw materials or as markets for finished industrial goods. The seeds of war are sown with economic greed. If we analyze the causes of war throughout history, we find that the pursuit of economic expansion consistently leads to military adventures. "There is enough for everybody's need, but not enough for anybody's greed," said Gandhi. Swadeshi is thus a prerequisite for peace.

The economists and industrialists of our time fail to see when enough is enough. Even when countries reach a very high material standard of living, they are still caught up with the idea of economic growth. Those who do not know when enough is enough will never have enough, but those who know when enough is enough already have enough. Swadeshi is the way to comprehensive peace: peace with oneself, peace between peoples, and peace with nature. The global economy drives people toward high performance, high achievement, and high ambition for materialistic success. This results in stress, loss of meaning, loss of inner peace, loss of space for personal and family relationships, and loss of spiritual life. Gandhi realized that in the past, life in India was not only prosperous but also conducive to philosophical and spiritual development. Swadeshi for Gandhi was the spiritual imperative.

The rise of English colonialism

Historically, the Indian local economy was dependent upon the most productive and sustainable agriculture and horticulture and on pottery, furniture making, metal work, jewelry, leather work, and many other economic activities. But its basis had traditionally been in textiles. Each village had its spinners, carders, dyers, and weavers who were the heart of the village economy. However, when India was flooded with machine-made, inexpensive, mass-produced textiles from Lancashire, the local textile artists were rapidly put out of business, and the village economy suffered terribly. Gandhi thought it essential that the industry be restored, and started a

campaign to stem the influx of British cloth. Due to his efforts, hundreds of thousands of untouchables and caste Hindus joined together to discard the mill-made clothes imported from England or from city factories and learned to spin their own yarn and weave their own cloth. The spinning wheel became the symbol of economic freedom, political independence, and cohesive and classless communities. The weaving and wearing of homespun cloth became marks of distinction for all social groups.

Also responsible for the destruction of India's home economy in the eighteenth century was the introduction of British education under colonial rule. Lord Macaulay, introducing the Indian Education Act in the British Parliament, said, "A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India ... Neither as a language of the law, nor as a language of religion has the Sanskrit any particular claim to our engagement ... We must do our best to form a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."

This aim was pursued with the entire might of the British Raj. Traditional schools were replaced by colonial schools and universities. Wealthy Indians were sent to public schools such as Eton and Harrow and universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. Educated Indians increasingly learned English poetry, English law, and English customs to the neglect of their own culture. Reading Shakespeare and the 'London Times' became much more fashionable than reading Indian classics such as the 'Ramayana', the 'Mahabharata', the 'Vedas', and the 'Upanishads'. Educated Indians saw their own culture as backward, uncivilized, and old-fashioned. They wanted to become rulers of India, but they wanted to rule like the British.

If there was any one person who represented this type of Western-educated Indian it was Jawaharlal Nehru, who became the first prime minister after independence. Nehru sought to promote the industrialization of India not via the capitalist route but by centralized planning. His inspiration came from the intellectuals of the London School of Economics and the Fabian Society - the Labour Party's think tank.

Gandhi, on the other hand, believed that India's essential contribution to the world was simply her India-ness. He felt that Indians should recognize their own genius and not try to copy Western culture, which was simply a tool of colonization. Economics and politics should not simply be concerned with material things but should be the means to the fulfilment of cultural, spiritual, and religious ends. In fact, economics should not be separated from the deep spiritual foundations of life. This can be best achieved, according to Gandhi, when every individual is an integral part of the community; when the production of goods is on a small scale; when the economy is local; and when homemade handicrafts are given preference. These conditions are conducive to a holistic, spiritual, ecological, and communitarian pattern of society.

In Gandhi's view, spiritual values should not be separated from politics, economics, agriculture, education, and all the other activities of daily life. In this integral design, there is no conflict between spiritual and material. It is no good for some people to close themselves in a monastic order practising religion and for other people to say that a spiritual life is only for saints and celibates. Such a separation of religion from society will breed corruption, greed, competition, power mania, and the exploitation of the weak and poor. Politics and economics without idealism will be a kind of prostitution, like sex without love.

Someone asked Gandhi, "What do you think of Western civilization?" He simply replied, "It would be a good idea." For Gandhi a machine civilization was no civilization. A society in which workers had to labour at a conveyor belt, in which animals were treated cruelly in factory farms,

and in which economic activity necessarily lead to ecological devastation could not be conceived of as a civilization. Its citizens could only end up as neurotics, the natural world would inevitably be transformed into a desert, and its cities into concrete jungles. In other words, global industrial society, as opposed to society made up of largely autonomous communities committed to the principle of swadeshi, is unsustainable. Swadeshi for Gandhi was a sacred principle - as sacred for him as the principle of truth and nonviolence. Every morning and evening, Gandhi repeated his commitment to swadeshi in his prayers.

Unfortunately, within six months of independence, Gandhi was assassinated, and Nehru gained a free hand in shaping the economy of India. Nehru found Gandhian thinking too idealistic, too philosophical, too slow, and too spiritual. He gathered around him Western-educated bureaucrats, and the enterprise to which they were jointly committed made them the unwitting agents of economic colonization. They pressed ahead with the construction of large dams and big factories, which for them were the temples and cathedrals of the new India. The spirit of dedication, idealism, and self-sacrifice that had been paramount under the leadership of Gandhi was quickly replaced by a lust for power, privilege, comfort, and money. Nehru and his colleagues followed the opposite path to that of swadeshi, and since that time, the history of India has been the history of corruption and political intrigue at the highest level. The political colonization of India might have ended officially with independence in 1947, but her economic colonization continued unabated and at an even greater pace. She has been turned into a playground for global economic forces.

Colonialism without the colonialists

Now, India continues to be ruled in the English way, but without English rulers. This is the tragedy of India, and there is no end in sight. The industrialists, the intellectuals, and the entrepreneurs in collusion with the government still see the salvation of India in her subordination to the policies of the World Bank and GATT. They see India as part of the global economy working hand in glove with the multinational corporations.

However, discontent among the Indian people is growing rapidly. The failures of the Congress Party under Nehru, his daughter, Indira Gandhi, and her son, Rajiv Gandhi, are fully evident to all. As Mahatma Gandhi predicted, the body politic is seething with corruption. The poor are poorer than ever, and the growing middle classes are turning away from the Congress Party. The farmers are agitating against the patenting of their seeds by multinational companies. The global economy of GATT is built on sand. Even though it may appear that its grip is firm, it has no grassroots support, and as its true implications become apparent, the people of India, among whom the teachings of Gandhi are still very much alive, will react against it and will return to swadeshi for the reenchantment of their local culture, their community, and their lives. In fact, the lessons of swadeshi may bring hope for an economics of permanence even among Westerners, once the fraudulent promise of economic growth and industrialism is exposed.

[Note: This was a chapter of: "The Case Against the Global Economy - and for a turn toward the local" (first edition) edited by Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith Sierra Club Books, 1996. However, this chapter was not included in the second edition published by Taylor and Francis, 2001; and, as far as can be determined, not included in any subsequent editions.]