

Transformation of Gandhi's Khadi: From a National Symbol to an Icon of Sustainable Product

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Abstract

This study explores the new transformation stages of a fabric called *khadi* by analyzing its function and acceptance in contemporary society and how it attempts to bring social change. Khadi, a type of cloth once considered an ordinary commodity, later transformed into a political symbol in India and is now recognized as an eco-conscious, sustainable fashion product.

Traditionally produced in South Asian countries, khadi is a handspun and handwoven fabric. In India, handspinning had disappeared by the early 19th century as the result of the Industrial Revolution and colonialism. However, it underwent a revival in the 1910s, in which Mohandas Gandhi played a critical role. Gandhi believed that this fabric represented his ideals and could aid in India's struggle for independence, so much so that khadi ended up becoming a symbol in itself. Gandhi saw not only the practical use of khadi as an ordinary object but also its power to transform the country. The khadi movement may not have succeeded as Gandhi had hoped, but khadi has gained status as a morally desirable product—that is, a sustainable option for the fashion and textile industries.

To explain how khadi transformed from a mere everyday fabric to a national symbol and a sustainable product within a century, one must examine Gandhi's philosophy, specifically its core ideas of "truth" and "nonviolence." These concepts are strongly associated with the production, consumption, and use of khadi and relate to its unique qualities. After the independence movement, khadi assumed two forms: 1) as a fabric that is believed to transform the country and strongly connected to India's politics and 2) as a fabric that continues Gandhism and brings about change in society as a sustainable product. By examining the domestic and international examples of khadi, this paper intends to capture how this fabric underwent a critical change.

Keywords: *Khadi; Sustainable Fashion; Gandhi; Handspinning; Handweaving; Indian Textiles*

Introduction

This study explores the new transformation stages of a fabric called *khadi* by analyzing its function and acceptance in contemporary society and how it attempts to bring social change. Having unique qualities, khadi was once an ordinary commodity and was then revived as a symbol of the Mahatma Gandhi-led Indian independent movement, gaining political meaning and function in colonial India. Currently, it has undergone a transformation into a new form with a new function.

Several scholars have examined the social aspect of khadi. Christopher Bayly has revealed the ability of khadi to convey moral quality to people (1). Moreover, Bernard Cohn and Emma Tarlo have focused on the role of the fabric when it is worn by people in relation to the political situation of colonial India (2), while Susan Bean has outlined the intention of Gandhi on khadi as a communication tool in society (3). Furthermore, Lisa Trivedi has explained how the fabric was used to visually organize the Gandhi's movement (4). Although the khadi of Gandhi has been a well-discussed topic, especially in the material culture, and its historical facts have been well

researched, some fields still need to be examined.

The current research captures the khadi of today, whose figure remains vague. The relevance of researching it is also found in design areas that have not fully been discovered yet. This research can provide a new perspective on material culture and design discourse by exploring the possibility of today's khadi as a sustainable product and introducing its transformation as the process of social and political reformation through a fabric. It will not focus on explaining the design of khadi but would rather contribute to a better understanding of how design has been and can be employed for social change. Additionally, western philosophers, such as John Ruskin, who was also inspired by William Morris, influence the concept of khadi, and it can prove an interesting link between western and eastern countries on design history. Almost of the same age as Morris but from a different place in the world, Gandhi considered that a fabric could change society in a better way, while Morris believed that his product can also do so.

The first section of this paper discusses the historical background that has led to the emergence of khadi in the political field during the colonial era, while the second section deals with the connection between khadi and the spirit of Gandhi. Lastly, this paper describes how the fabric has been passed on to the present and how it has been transformed by introducing several examples. In this way, this study highlights the dual function that khadi has obtained in contemporary society and explores its significance in modern times.

1. Historical Background

1.1 Definition of Khadi

Also known as *khaddar*, khadi is a handspun and handwoven cloth and is also considered a mere cloth owing to its manual method of production before the textile process became mechanized. Traditionally, khadi is a South Asian fabric that has mostly used cotton. Nowadays, however, khadi is no longer defined by its material, as silk or wool can also be used as a result of the higher focus on its production. In India, handspinning had disappeared by the early 19th century as the result of the Industrial Revolution and colonialism (5). However, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi played a critical role in its revival in the 1910s.

1.2 A Brief History of India's Textile Industry

To examine why Gandhi viewed this simple and coarse fabric as crucial for India's independence, one must first be familiar with the history of India's textile industry. India was one of the world's largest textile exporters. However, the British East India Company began selling calicos and muslins in Europe in the early 18th century, and profits from the trade fueled the industrialization in Britain (6). One of the first sectors to be mechanized by the Industrial Revolution was cotton manufacturing, in which Britain started producing large quantities of cheap textiles and exported them into India. This transformed India from the biggest textile exporter to one of its largest importers, which caused to destroy the country's textile production.

1.3 The Origin of Political Fabric

Such a significant reversal in the textile trade led several political leaders in India to believe that colonialism was the root cause of poverty in the country. Dadabhai Naoroji, one of India's nationalist leaders during the 19th century, proposed *drain theory*, which claimed that Britain took India's wealth under the colonial system (7). In such a situation, fabric had become less of a commodity even before Gandhi's movement. Bengali people boycotted foreign products and were encouraged to use national products (8) in what was called the Bengal Swadeshi movement of 1903–1908. However, the economic turnover experienced by India's cotton industry was not only the reason for fabric's transformation into a political symbol. Since people wear textiles as clothes,

fabric became a visual indication through which patriots are identified from non-patriots. The social aspect of fabric as an ordinary commodity also helped elevate textiles as a unique political status symbol in India (9). It was against this background that Gandhi started his khadi movement.

2. Gandhi and Khadi

2.1 A Brief Biography of the Father of India

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, also known as Mahatma Gandhi, or the father of India, was a lawyer, politician, and social activist known for his significant role in India's independence in the 20th century. Born in 1869, Gandhi studied law in London and spent more than 20 years in South Africa. After returning to India in 1915, he led several campaigns for India's freedom from British rule, one of which was the khadi movement, which revived the traditional technique of handspinning and handweaving. He promoted this simple fabric as a means of self-reliance and self-governance to challenge colonial domination until he was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist in 1948.

2.2 Gandhi's Philosophy

Gandhi's reasons for promoting a handspun and handwoven fabric to the entire country may be explained through his philosophies and their connection to khadi. His thoughts regarding khadi were inspired by different ideologies, such as the early Swadeshi movement, vegetarians and theosophists he met in London, and the works of Leo Tolstoy and John Ruskin (10). These elements helped shape his unique philosophies and began his practical experiments with khadi.

His fundamental philosophies include *truth* and *nonviolence*. Gandhi considered truth as the most sovereign principle, which can even be equal to God (11), while nonviolence pertains to the search for truth (12). The basic concept of nonviolence is not only refraining from hurting anyone and anything (13) but also loving them (14). Gandhi believed that modern civilization and the mechanization brought about by colonialism contradicted both of his philosophies, as they hurt people by forcing them to work in inferior working environments (15). It cannot be true that modern civilization could harm its own people.

Therefore, to pursue truth and nonviolence, Gandhi developed his ideas into the ideologies upon which India's independence was founded. The key ideas in the connection between Gandhi's thoughts and khadi are *Swaraj*, *Swadeshi*, and *Satyagraha*. *Swaraj* refers to a country's self-governance as well as one's control of their mind and desires (16). Meanwhile, *Swadeshi* pertains to the boycotting of foreign goods and the adoption of domestic products. Lastly, *Satyagraha*, inspired by Tolstoy's *passive resistance*, is the method that characterized Gandhi the most. According to Gandhi, *Satyagraha* means 'the strongest force that one can possibly imagine or wish for and is a complete substitution for brute force (17).' He also called it *love-force* or *soul-force* (18).

Swaraj is the goal to achieve, *Satyagraha* is the method to pursue, and *Swadeshi* is the practice to follow. Gandhi promoted khadi as an act of *Swadeshi* because he believed it can embody his ideal in the real world.

2.3 Gandhi's Experiments with Khadi

The production, adoption, and appearance of khadi all represent Gandhi's philosophy.

Khadi production was indeed regarded as an act of *Swadeshi*, as the fabric was handmade and was viewed as an opposition to factory labor. The simplicity and accessibility of khadi techniques and equipment inspired Gandhi to involve the entire Indian population, both rich and poor, in the practice (19). In addition, it was also considered an act of prayer that allowed rich people to imagine the situation of the poor (20)—a nonviolent means to achieve *Swaraj*.

The adoption of khadi signified people's satisfaction with simple clothing and their devotion to Swadeshi. Gandhi, who opposed materialism and was skeptical of Western modernity, considered the purchase of factory-manufactured goods to be against the concept of nonviolence, as factories exploit the labor force.

Khadi had been produced using undyed handspun cotton threads and manually woven; therefore, it was white, uneven, and rough. The fabric's aesthetics reminded many Indian people of widows or rural peasants. Gandhi sought to visually unite the rich and the poor to break the boundaries between them. These ideas enriched the symbolic aspect of khadi, allowing it to gain a status beyond that of ordinary commodity.

Gandhi viewed the spinning wheel as a symbol of nonviolence (21) and khadi as a symbol of Swaraj and *national emancipation* (22). Khadi then began to assume meanings that transcended its nature as a fabric and played more of a political role in society. It became such a powerful symbol that it is currently used as the official fabric of India's national flag.

However, khadi also caused certain controversies. For example, Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian Nobel Laureate in Literature, argued that handspinning was an extremely simple and unrealistic means for solving poverty in India (23). Sarojini Naidu, a politician, poet, and one of Gandhi's closest supporters, also criticized khadi as lacking India's traditional beauty (24). Despite the fact that mechanization was essential for the development of society and that the khadi movement had not succeeded as Gandhi had hoped, the inherent value of khadi is still worth examining.

3. Contemporary Khadi in Two Ways

Khadi's legacy endures even today. Hence, modern-day khadi can be classified into two different forms with similar goals: as a fabric that is believed to transform India and is strongly connected with its politics and as a fabric that continues Gandhism and brings about social change as a sustainable product.

3.1 Khadi as a *National Brand*

The Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC), a governmental organization, was established in 1956. It aims to provide employment, produce saleable articles, promote self-reliance among the poor, and build a strong rural community spirit by strengthening khadi and other village industries, such as honey and paper (25). The KVIC is the only entity that is authorized to produce the Indian national flag using khadi (26).

Many of the KVIC's projects include supporting khadi producers, protecting khadi's value by branding it, and organizing khadi fashion shows. In its two-year progress report published in 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated, 'Earlier khadi for nation and khadi for fashion, now it is becoming khadi for transformation (27).' The KVIC expects khadi to be instrumental in transforming the rural industry into a national strength. While Gandhi's ideal form of khadi was white and coarse, the KVIC currently sells different colors and designs of the fabric. They also use the term 'khadi' for other products, such as khadi shampoos, khadi candies, or khadi cosmetics. Hence, khadi is becoming a socioeconomic national brand for modern India.



Figure 1: Indian khadi flag sold by the KVIC[<https://www.kviconline.gov.in/khadimask/singleproduct.jsp?PRODUCTID=10805>]2020.



Figure 2: Khadi shampoo sold by the KVIC[<https://www.kviconline.gov.in/khadimask/singleproduct.jsp?PRODUCTID=10090>]2020.

3.2 Domestic Designers: Reimagining the Fabric of Patriots

Several domestic and international designers regarded khadi as a sustainable product and assigned it a new image. The fabric can be sustainable in terms of eco-consciousness because handspinning and handweaving leave a low carbon footprint and require less water. Furthermore, most khadi designers care about people's livelihood and prefer khadi because they believe it can provide employment and instill respect and dignity in people.

One of the first designers who contributed to the emergence of khadi in the fashion industry in India is Ritu Beri, an influential designer who launched her first khadi collection in 1990. Other designers followed her footsteps by showcasing their own khadi collections.

Khadi is not anymore a simple and coarse patriotic fabric; it has experienced a significant renewal led by some domestic designers. The Khadi Cult (The K Cult), a label founded in 2017 by two young sisters, aims to become a 100% sustainable and conscious brand (28). The founders stated that they selected khadi because of its versatility, eco-consciousness, and potential to provide employment to weavers (29).

With their quirky and playful print patterns, the K Cult successfully reimagined the 'poor man's fabric' into a 'vogueish' garment and incorporated the millennial generation into the loop of a sustainable society. As the old image of khadi was updated, it established its footing in a new arena of sustainable fashion.

In India, where the symbolic image of khadi is deeply rooted in people's minds, it seems essential for khadi to transition from its strong patriotic form toward assuming a status in the fashion industry and promote its sustainability.



Figure 3: Chameleon shirt by The K Cult[<https://www.thekcult.com/products/girgit-top-blob-pants>]2021.



Figure 4: Watermelon shirt by The K Cult[<https://www.thekcult.com/products/the-watermelon-shirt>]2021.

3.3 International Designers: Branding Khadi Sustainability

Khadi is currently popular worldwide as well. Issey Miyake, a Japanese fashion designer, has been producing khadi products for his HaaT label and even held a khadi exhibition in 2018 and 2019. Meanwhile, Bess Nielsen's Khadi and Co. is one of the pioneer brands that promoted khadi and its spirit at the international stage and bestowed on the fabric a luxury status. Through these efforts by international designers, khadi took on a new value, which contributed to the 'slowing down' of fashion.

Another notable example that attracted international attention is WomenWeave, an organization established in Maheshwar in 2003 by Sally Holkar, whose promotion of khadi was a clear expression of Gandhism. WomenWeave conducts different projects that help local women obtain sustainable employment and aim to promote handloom weaving as a profitable, sustainable, fulfilling, and dignified form of women's livelihood (30). Their core activities include training weavers, who will help link their products to sustainable markets, where people understand their products' unique quality and where ethos is an important part of their project. Inspired by Gandhi's vision of khadi as means to connect rural communities and urban consumers, WomenWeave is a present-day embodiment of Gandhism.

Conclusion: From a National Symbol to an Iconic Sustainable Product

This paper describes the historical background of khadi and its transformation into the following two forms in contemporary society: 1) a national brand that seeks to regain India's power and 2) a sustainable product that adapts the moral spirit of Gandhi to contemporary demands. These two forms are different in that the first refers to the original role that khadi played for the nation during the struggle of the country for independence, while the second intends to rebrand a stereotyped image but still inherits the original meaning of Gandhi. The transformation process of khadi has proven the essential role that design can play for social change and how the traditional design can

be updated to answer the current demands.

The fashion industry is one of the worst offenders as far as environmental and ethical issues are concerned; hence, it desperately needs positive developments to alleviate these problems. In keeping with the spirit of Gandhi, sustainability has become a new term to describe khadi. Nearly a century since the Gandhian khadi movement, our society has proven that his concerns about materialism were relevant to a certain extent. The concept of nonviolence—that anyone and anything must be protected from harm—is also worth considering today. The vision of Gandhi appears to endure through khadi as the symbolic fabric of India is currently becoming an iconic fabric of sustainability.

Notes

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