

**Khadi, Gender And Freedom: The Role Of Women In The Spinning And Symbolism Of  
The Indian Independence Movement****Prof. Shalini Gangwar****Department of History****J. D.V. M .P. G. College****Kanpur****(Received -15 February2026/Revised-28February2026/Accepted-5March2026/Published-29March2026)****Abstract**

Khadi a hand spun and woven cotton cloth, strongly identified with Mahatma Gandhi became one of the most potent symbols of the nationalist movement in India. While its political and economic connotations in relation to the nationalist movement have been more broadly considered by historians, its link with women's involvement in the nationalist movement has remained somewhat neglected. This paper considers how the promotion of Khadi and the spinning wheel provided women with a way of involvement in the freedom movement within designated gender boundaries. Gandhi's constructive programme used the domestic work of women to create political resistance, enticing women from all social strata into the movement. Women participated in swadeshi by spinning, weaving, and wearing Khadis. It showcased their attachment and connection to swadeshi and of a more-far reaching coming-together of the nation through their mass participation. Khadi also offered women, who were sequestered into the domestic sphere, a space and opportunity to gain and support themselves, for women to share experiences and for some physical space, if limited, to their participation in the freedom movement. However, the Khadi movement also had many contradictions. Khadi enabled women to participate in public life but also further defined the gender roles of a woman as someone who was dedicated in the service of the nation and its people. Using archival documentation and feminist theory, this paper will demonstrate how Khadi was a gendered phenomenon, empowering, but also enacting Indian gender roles.

**Keywords: Khadi, Charkha, Participation Of Women, Gandhian Swadeshi, Indian Nationalism, Gender And Nationalism.**

**Introduction**

The Indian freedom struggle was not a political movement alone, but also a social and cultural revolution. During this period, a number of symbols came into use. None was more crucial for the increasing identity of independence than Khadi. When promoted by Mahatma Gandhi, it stood for economic self-sufficiency and political pro-Indian sentiment and rejection of imported textile.

Gandhi claimed that the success of the Khadi programme would hinge on mass participation of the common people, and of women in particular. Spinning had traditionally been the work of the household, and generally of women, in many parts of India; Gandhi saw that by getting women to spin and wear khadi he was turning a traditional domestic activity into a political statement (Kishwar, 1985).

Spinning was a tangibly useful activity to participate in, for many women, as a part of the nationalist cause. The charkha symbolized strength, self-dependence and having a focus on the wider independence fight. Women involved in Khadi production also fostered a closeness to the independence movement, and joined in new social activities which developed around the centres of spinning, Khadi displays and community programs (Thakur, 2017).

However, the impact of Khadi on women's empowerment was not so simple. Although it opened up new possibilities for involvement, women's participation was used to uphold traditional notions of their social roles. Women were to be lauded for patience, moral strength and sacrifice and not for active leadership in nationalist politics (Kasturi & Mazumdar, 2010). This paper thus investigates how khadi inspired the participation of women in the Indian nationalist movement. It investigates the ways in which spinning and khadi production was linked to political action, and the political symbolism of Khadi garments.

### **Literature Review**

Academic debates over the Indian nationalist movement have tended to highlight the role played by women within the political mobilization. Previous histories of Indian politics have focused more on the involvement of men and ascribing a subordinate role to women. More recent historical studies have shown that Indian women were heavily involved in most of the politics associated with Gandhian politics, such as the Khadi programme.

The work of Kasturi and Mazumdar (2010) is also important in analyzing women's participation in nationalist movement. As they find, Gandhi positioned Khadi as a field where women could participate effectively in the reconstruction of the nation. Connecting spinning with service to the nation, Gandhi inspired women to find their everyday domestic work as part of the political enterprise.

Madhu Kishwar's critique of how women were interpreted by Gandhi demonstrates what moral framework was used to raise women. Often Gandhi would talk of women's qualities as endurance, patience and sympathy. These qualities made women seem especially fitted for the construct of spinning and constructive work (Kishwar, 1985).

Lisa Trivedi explores the symbolic role that dress played in the politics of nationalism. She argues that Khadi, for example, had a double meaning symbolizing ideology as well as materiality: as a gear for dissemination of political message, it signified resistance on the part of the masses to colonial control of economic resources and a way of expressing identification with the nationalist ideology.

Other historians have additionally analysed how Khadi production created social spaces. Khadi spinning centres, cooperative groups and exhibitions brought women from different classes, regions and communities together and supported the dissemination of nationalist ideology (Thakur 2017). These activities created political consciousness as well as networks of women. Meanwhile, some researchers have considered the shortcomings of the Khadi programme, while some others have criticized the movement on grounds that it failed to bring about tangible change to the structural inequalities of caste, class and gender (Jha, 2004). The rural female workers in the production of much of the Khadi yarn received little of the economic benefits of the khadi sales whereas the urban elite appeared to co-opt as a symbolic gesture of wearing khadi (Jha, 2004).

However, despite the limitations, over all the Khadi movement is recognized as having brought a closer proximity between the home and the nationalist politics. By spinning, weaving and wearing Khadi, women were able to connect to the national movement.

#### Khadi as Women's Work and National Duty

In Gandhi's idea of constructive work hand spinning was not merely a natural economic activity, but an inward moral activity. Gandhi was expecting hand spinning to revive the rural economy and to loosen the reliance on imported British textiles (Gandhi, n.d.).

This idea had special relevance for women. Because spinning had long been equated with work, many women could get involved with the Khadi movement without facing serious social stigma; the spinning wheel enabled them to relate to the nationalist movement while staying within the domain of the home.

This involvement was further extended by the establishment of a number of khadi centres and training programmes. Women, in some circumstances, were able to generate an income by learning spinning and weaving. This was certainly the case for widows and women with little money, who gained social contact and financial aid from these activities (Thakur, 2017).

On a symbolic level, then, the charkha became associated with discipline and moral commitment. In fact, Gandhi often spoke of spinning as a kind of meditation: a link between individual effort and national regeneration (Kishwar, 1985).

## Symbolism of Khadi and National Identity

Khadi also came to symbolize something much larger than the economy. Khadi clothing also signified a visual symbol of nationalism and a nationalist identity. Countries that wore homespun and shunned foreign cloths, were considered to be embracing swadeshi and fighting rule (Trivedi, 2007).

Women were an essential link in the running of the domestic distribution system and in propagating Khadi as a household as well as a national matter. Donning Khadi saris at meetings and nationalist rallies symbolised a commitment to independence. Such women leaders as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay then helped popularize Khadi as a patriotic dress. The Khadi also assisted in creating a common national identity. Women from distinct regions, religions and social groups engaged in Khadi campaigns and spinning. Not always having similar experiences, spinning still stood as a symbolic link among various communities (Kasturi & Mazumdar, 2010).

## **Domestic Labour And Political Participation**

One of the most productive aspects of the social reform generated by the Khadi movement was the transformation of its domestic labour into a mode of political involvement. Housebound and household activities were integrated with the national struggle.

Women frequently established collective spinning groups, brought together in close proximity wherein they could share ideas about political events. These kinds of sessions formed informal grid from which nationalist ideas spread. As well, there were cases in which Khadi centres functioned as places where women could plan protests and boycott campaigns against colonial administration (Thakur, 2017).

The association of domestic labour and political activism prompted more acknowledgment of women's role in society. However, this framework did not fully undermine how women are expected to stay in charge of housework.

## **Conclusion**

The Khadi movement was a way to bring women into the nationalist struggle. By operationalizing spinning in a politicized manner, Gandhi devised a mechanism for Indian women to get involved in the movement while simultaneously fulfilling the expectations placed upon them. Production in the Khadi sector afforded women an entry into the economy, social interactions, and nationalist activities.

At the same time, the movement reflected the gender norms of its historical context. Women's participation was often framed in terms of service and moral duty rather than leadership.

Consequently, Khadi functioned both as a means of empowerment and as a symbol shaped by traditional expectations.

Despite these contradictions, women used the opportunities created by the Khadi movement to negotiate new forms of identity and participation. Through spinning, weaving, and the use of Khadi clothing, they connected domestic labour with the broader struggle for national freedom.

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