
UNIT 15 SWADESHI

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15.1 INTRODUCTION

Swadeshi is that spirit within us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote.- Gandhi

The word *svadeśī* derives from Sanskrit and is a sandhi or conjunction of two Sanskrit words. *Sva* means “self” or “own” and *deśa* means country, so *svadeśa* would be “own country”, and *svadeśī*, the adjectival form, would mean “of one’s own country”. The opposite of *svadeśī* in Sanskrit is *videśī* or “not of one’s country”. The word swadeshi had many connotations in Gandhian thought- economic, political, cultural and philosophical. It is central to Gandhi’s philosophy, which in effect, means self-sufficiency. Swadeshi is that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote. Swadeshi is the political movement in British India that encouraged domestic production and boycott of the foreign goods. In politics, it is defending the indigenous institutions. In economics, things that are produced by one’s immediate neighbours and serve those industries by making them efficient and complete where they might be found wanting. In religion, it means protecting the tradition of one’s own ancestral religion. By advocating swadeshi in all these spheres, Gandhi argues for an amalgamation of these by keeping away from its defects. In other words, swadeshi is the philosophy of defence of one’s own *home* by revitalising it through all means. However, historically, swadeshi as a movement is significant in national movement directing against the boycott of western goods by defending indigenous industries and its goods. Gandhi considers that much of the deep poverty of the masses is due to the ruinous departure from Swadeshi in the economic and industrial life. In the spirit of swadeshi, Gandhi’s idea of economy is self-supportive and self-contained economy. His religion is not only *sanatan* but also tolerant. Gandhi says, *I must not serve my distant neighbour at the expense of the nearest. It is never vindictive or punitive. It is in no sense narrow, for I buy from every part of the world what is needed for my growth. I refuse to buy from anybody anything, however nice or beautiful, if it interferes with my growth or injures those whom Nature has made my first care.*

The philosophy of swadeshi spins around the idea of service to our immediate neighbours. Gandhi holds that Swadeshi is the only doctrine consistent with the law of humility and love. Swadeshi, for Gandhi, was the spiritual imperative. Swadeshi, as a strategy, was a key focus of Gandhi and described it as the soul of swaraj (self-rule). Swadeshi is a concept evolved in search of making a nation against the colonial British India. Swadeshi assigned national meaning to territory, economy and culture. Swadeshi movement aimed to achieve swaraj by establishing India's economic self-sufficiency from Britain. This unit explores the various facets of Gandhi's idea of swadeshi and its relevance in the contemporary world, which is market-centred, greedy and commercialised. In the times of globalisation, the philosophy of swadeshi is inspiring in protecting one's own economy and identity.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand:

- Gandhi's concept and meaning of swadeshi.
- The meaning of self-reliance.
- The meaning of swadeshi as an economic philosophy.

15.2 SWADESHI: SELF-RELIANCE (IN DEFENCE OF INDIGENOUS LIFE)

Generally, the idea of Swadeshi in Gandhian philosophy means local self-reliance and use of local knowledge and abilities. In other words it aims at appropriate technology. *Swadeshi* (Self-reliance) is mainly understood to mean a protectionist technique that Gandhi employed against the mercantile policies of the British, whereby the masses were urged to abstain from using cloth manufactured outside India, and instead to use cotton, silk, or wool cloth made in India. But Gandhi gives it a broader meaning: "*Swadeshi* carries a great and profound meaning. It does not mean merely the use of what is produced in one's own country. That meaning is certainly there in *swadeshi*. But there is another meaning implied in it which is far greater and much more important. *Swadeshi* means reliance on our own strength. We should also know what we mean by 'reliance on our own strength'. 'Our strength' means the strength of our body, our mind, and our soul. From among these, on which should we depend? The answer is brief. The soul is supreme and therefore soul-force is the foundation on which man must build." (Essential writings of Mahatma Gandhi, p.362)

In sociology and critical social theory, alienation refers to an individual's estrangement from traditional community and others in general. It is considered by many that the atomism of modern society means that individuals have shallower relations with other people than they would normally the term "exploitation" may carry two distinct meanings. One, the act of using something for any purpose. In this case, exploit is a synonym for use. Two, The act of using something in an unjust or cruel manner.

Gandhi believed that alienation and exploitation often occur when production and consumption are divorced from their social and cultural context, and that local enterprise is a way to avoid these problems. To renew India's vitality and regenerate its culture, Gandhi had a vision of free India that 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. Gandhi considers that 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 home-made 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 'sadhus', and constantly flowing streams of pilgrims have traditionally made their contribution.

Gandhi defends that the doctrine of swadeshi is neither exclusive nor patriotic. It is inclusive and considers everybody in the nature. Gandhi felt that in seeming to serve India to the exclusion of every other country, "I do not harm any other country. My patriotism is both exclusive and inclusive. It is exclusive in the sense that, in all humility, I confine my attention to the land of my birth, but is inclusive in the sense that my service is not of a competitive or antagonistic nature." (Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, Madras: G.A.Natesan & Co., 1933, p. 344).

In the words of Gandhi:

I believe in the truth implicitly that a man can serve his neighbours and humanity at the same time, the condition being that the service of the neighbours is in no way selfish or exclusive, i.e., does not in any way involve the exploitation of any other human being. The neighbours will then understand the spirit in which such service is given. They will also know that they will be expected to give their services to their neighbours. Thus considered, it will spread like the proverbial snow-ball gathering strength in geometrical progression, encircling the whole earth. It follows that Swadeshi is that spirit which dictates man to serve his next-door neighbour to the exclusion of any other. The condition that I have already mentioned is that the neighbour, thus served, has, in his turn, to serve his own neighbour. In this sense, Swadeshi is never exclusive. It recognizes the scientific limitation of human capacity for service (Harijan, 23-7-1947, p. 79).

15.3 SWADESHI: AN ECONOMIC PHILOSOPHY

Gandhi's *Swadeshi* is an economic doctrine. It proposes not only self-reliance and usage of indigenous skills and knowledge systems, but also propagates simple living and one's own dignity. In times of globalisation, market-oriented and commoditised life, swadeshi has its contemporary relevance.

Gandhi's idea of swadeshi deals about the importance of indigenous skills and its productivity. He believed that swadeshi is means in realising the self-reliance and self-governance (swaraj). In that sense his politics of spirituality has not only internalised the essence of material production and labour, but also proves that he is a pragmatic philosopher. The practice of economic philosophy of swadeshi had direct hit on British Empire and its economy.

Gandhi was never dogmatic in articulating his ideas of swadeshi; rather he is practical and had great concern for his fellow human beings. It is true that he opposes the western

civilisation based on greed-centred industry and technology. He is even critical about the modernity based on this kind of temperament. In place of individual centred philosophy, he argued for community centred religious philosophy. In other words, in his philosophy the life and economy of village occupies central place against the city and modernity. In that sense, he has favoured a reformed tradition. It does not mean that Gandhi is against reason, science and technology. He defends his religious and cultural traditions, indigenous skills and traditional economy in the backdrop of western colonial rule but at the same time he opts for appropriate technology. It provides alternative reasoning to the logic of western modernity.

Gandhi never meant that his idea of swadeshi has totally excluded the foreign or western in course of strong defence of home industry. As Gandhi says,

I have never considered the exclusion of everything foreign under every conceivable circumstance as a part of Swadeshi. The broad definition of Swadeshi is the use of all home-made things to the exclusion of foreign things, in so far as such use is necessary for the protection of home industry, more especially those industries without which India will become pauperized. In my opinion, therefore, Swadeshi which excludes the use of everything foreign, no matter how beneficial it may be, and irrespective of the fact that it impoverishes nobody, is a narrow interpretation of Swadeshi (Young India, 17-6-1926, p. 218).

Further Gandhi holds the view that,

I buy useful healthy literature from every part of the world. I buy surgical instruments from England, pins and pencils from Austria and watches from Switzerland. But I will not buy an inch of the finest cotton fabric from England or Japan or any other part of the world because it has injured and increasingly injures the millions of the inhabitants of India.

I hold it to be sinful for me to refuse to buy the cloth spun and woven by the needy millions of India's paupers and to buy foreign cloth although it may be superior in quality to the Indian hand-spun. My Swadeshi, therefore, chiefly centers round the hand-spun Khaddar and extends to everything that can be and is produced in India (Young India, 12-3-1925, p. 88).

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." Gandhi's struggle of boycotting foreign goods and promotion of swadeshi goods is based on a principle but not on hatred against British. Gandhi is in principle against the commoditised consumer goods. In that way, swadeshi goods are not an exception to him. As Gandhi maintains, *Even Swadeshi, like any other good thing, can be ridden to death if it is made a fetish. That is a danger that must be guarded against. To reject foreign manufactures, merely because they are foreign and to go on wasting national time and money in the promotion in one's country of manufactures for which it is not suited would be criminal folly and a negation of the Swadeshi spirit. A true votary of Swadeshi will never harbour ill-will towards*

the foreigner; he will not be actuated by antagonism towards anybody on earth. Swadeshism is not a cult of hatred. It is a doctrine of selfless service that has its roots in the purest AHIMSA, i.e., love. (M K Gandhi, From Yerawada Mandir: Ashram Observance, Translated by V.G. Desai, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1957, p. 66).

15.4 VILLAGE ECONOMY

The British believed in centralised, industrialised, and mechanised modes of production. Gandhi turned this principle on its head and envisioned a decentralised, homegrown, hand-crafted mode of production. In his words, it is “**Not mass production, but production by the masses.**” In Gandhi’s swadeshi economy, village economy and local industry play an important role. He aims at self-sufficiency of the village community. 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. 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.

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, *It’s 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.

Gandhi believes that a locally based economy enhances community spirit, community relationships, and community well-being. Such an economy encourages mutual aid. 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 on the mercy of the bosses.

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, it is the real swadeshi. These conditions are conducive to a holistic, spiritual, ecological, and communitarian pattern of society. “My idea of village *swaraj* [self-rule] is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity” (Essential Writings of Gandhi, p.358).

15.5 SWADESHI MOVEMENT AND KHADI

Initially the idea of swadeshi figured in the writings of early nationalists such as Dadabhai Nauroji, M.G.Ranade and Bipin Chandra Pal, who came in defence of the national economy against the colonial economy. The swadeshi movement assumed its radical and mass form after 1905 following the contested spatial partition of Bengal. In 1907, swadeshi was officially incorporated within the conceptual and ideological framework of the Indian National Congress in the avowed objective of *swadeshi swaraj*. The partition of Bengal created widespread indignation all over the country. In the turbulent atmosphere that followed the boycott, Swadeshi movements started. Swadeshi was a paradigmatic instance of totalising territorial nativism. Historically Swadeshi was linked to the other categories such as national economy, territory and culture. Swadeshi literally meaning one's own country, aimed at the promotion of indigenous industry. Along with Swadeshi, the boycott of British goods was organised. The Swadeshi and boycott were powerful instruments directed against foreign rule. They attacked the British rule where it hurt most. About Swadeshi, Lajpat Rai said, “I regard it as a salvation of my country. The Swadeshi movement ought to teach us how to organise our capital, resources, labour, energies, talents for the greatest good of all Indians irrespective of creed, colour or caste. It ought to unite us, our religious and denominational differences notwithstanding. In my opinion, Swadeshi ought to be the common religion of united India.” On the boycott movement, he said, “The meaning of the boycott is this ... The primary thing is prestige of the government and the boycott strikes at the root of the prestige. The illusory thing they call prestige is more powerful and potent than authority itself and propose to do this by boycott - We desire to turn away our faces from the government house and turn them to the huts of people”.

In Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* of 1909 Swaraj, Satyagraha and Swadeshi are key principles. To realise the swaraj, Gandhi believes that the ideal of swadeshi is necessary in every sense. He appreciated the Indian civilisation against western to make meaningful interpretation of swaraj and satyagraha. Gandhi took this swadeshi to the popular level by making a powerful political movement with mobilisation of masses. Gandhi created a new form of swadeshi politics that encouraged the production and exclusive consumption of *khadi*. Sumit Sarkar, the noted historian, defines the concept of Swadeshi, a sentiment closely associated with many phases of Indian nationalism-that indigenous goods should be preferred by consumers even if they were more expensive than or inferior in quality to their imported industries and that it was patriotic duty of men with capital to pioneer such industries even though profits initially might be minimal or non-existent (Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1905-1908, New Delhi, 1973, p.92).

Gandhi describes swadeshi as a call to consumer to be aware of the violence he is causing by supporting those industries that result in poverty, harm to workers and to humans and other creatures. Indian nationalists believed that the causes of their economic woes were partly due to the British colonialisation of India. Swadeshi was a nationalist movement to boycott British goods and to buy Indian goods.

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 base 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 the 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 a mark of distinction for all social groups.

Khadi: A Symbol of Economic Sufficiency

The term *swadeshi* had both economic and political dimensions in India's struggle against British colonialism. For Gandhi, it is centred on handspun *khaddar* and extended to everything that could be produced indigenously by rural masses. *Khadi* emerged as a symbol of *swadeshi*. The *swadeshi* workers articulated the significance of *khadi* to the people of nation through various forms. *Khadi* was portrayed as the material artifact of the nation, which is a traditional product and produced by traditional means. The Gandhian nationalist movement rendered *khadi* a discursive concept by defining its significance in terms of contemporary politics and economics of *swadeshi*. The *swadeshi* proponents effectively transformed a common object of everyday life, homespun, home-woven cloth, into the consummate symbol of the *Indian* community. As it is observed, *khadi* became a visual symbol in that it marked individual bodies as distinctly Indian in relation to visual symbols of regional, religious, caste and class identification. Susan Bean views *khadi* as both a symbol of India's potential economic self-sufficiency and a medium for communicating to the British the dignity of poverty and equality of Indian civilisation.

15.6 SWADESHI: A RELIGIOUS IDEA

Gandhi links up his idea of *swadeshi* to religion. *Swadeshi* is not an isolated economic and political principle of his philosophy. It is very much connected to his philosophy of spiritualism and religion. Gandhi considers economic *swadeshi* not as a boycott movement undertaken by the way of revenge, but as a religious principle to be followed by all. *Swadeshi* is a religious principle to be undergone in utter disregard of physical discomfort caused to individuals. A person conforming to the ideas of *swadeshi* will learn to do without a hundred things which today he considers necessary.

According to Gandhi, *Swadeshi* in religion teaches one to measure the glorious past and re-enact it in the present generation. The pandemonium that is going on in Europe shows that modern civilisation represents forces of evil and darkness, whereas the ancient, *i.e.*, Indian civilisation, represents in its essence, the divine force. Modern civilisation is chiefly materialistic, destructive, as ours is chiefly spiritual. *Swadeshi* is intimately related to Hindu religion. For Gandhi, Hindu religion is inclusive, tolerant and reformative. In that sense Gandhi's *swadeshi* upholds the tradition of Hindu religion.

15.7 SUMMARY

Swadeshi is one of the central principles of Gandhi's philosophy. Gandhi realises the swaraj through swadeshi. Swadeshi was a paradigmatic instance of totalising territorial nativism by connecting national economy, territory and culture. Gandhi's swadeshi is always in defence of indigenous skills, local knowledge systems, cultural traditions and village economy. Swadeshi may read as self-sufficiency of the home through revitalisation in all its aspects. Through Swadeshi, Gandhi is successful in uniting the economic struggles with nationalist movement. Gandhi envisaged an organic and political society characterised by the economic self-sufficiency and social harmony. The swadeshi worker not only symbolises charkha and khadi but also lives in simplicity and spirituality. In Gandhi's Swadeshi, economics would have a place but would not dominate society. The swadeshi economics is based on the principle of non-possessiveness, where as capitalism is based on possessiveness. It is believed that beyond a certain limit, economic growth becomes detrimental to human well-being. Gandhi's principle of swadeshi has relevance in the contemporary times of globalisation.

15.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss various connotations of swadeshi in the philosophy of Gandhi .
2. Critically evaluate the economic philosophy of Gandhi.
3. Write a note on village economy of Gandhi
5. Discuss the principles of swadeshi and its relevance in contemporary times.
6. Write a short note on:
 - a) Khadi Industry
 - b) Swadeshi Movement

SUGGESTED READINGS

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