

AN EMERGENT MOMENT OF SELF-HELP

A NEW LIGHT ON THE HISTORY OF GANDHI'S CONSTRUCTIVE WORK IN BENGAL, 1921–1941

Dissertation submitted to Jadavpur University in partial fulfillment
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Philosophy in the faculty of Arts

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List of Abbreviations

AISA All-India Spinners' Association.

AITUC All-India Trade Union Congress.

AIVIA All-India Village Industries Association.

BLA Bengal Labor Association.

BPCC Bengal Provincial Congress Committee.

CSP Congress Socialist Party.

CWGMG Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi.

DCC District Congress Committee.

HSRA Hindustan Socialist Revolutionary Army.

IAOS Irish Agricultural Organization Society.

KVIC *Khadi* and Village Industries Commission.

PCC Provincial Congress Committee.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The main argument of this thesis revolves around the principles and practical implications of Gandhi's Constructive Work program as implemented by his followers in Bengal during 1920's and 1930's. This work explores a multitude of distinct yet closely interconnected strands of local and national politics, and social work; the connections between the philosophical ideas of Gandhi and Bengal's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalist thinkers; the diverse conceptual threads of Self-Help schemes of the Hindu *Mela* and the *Swadeshi* movement which, in Bengal, got interwoven with Gandhi's Constructive Work; the diverging motives and vested interests of the elite politicians of Calcutta and the followers of Gandhi in *mufassil* and rural areas. In the process, light would be shed on the ideological and implicational differences of conventional politics and Constructive Work, and the practical working relation between the Constructive Work organizations at national level and those at Bengal's provincial level. Through this complex process of pulling together different threads of arguments, this thesis tries to show that these Constructive Work organizations attempted to prevent the gradual decline of the Indian National Congress (Congress) as a mass political organization in Bengal after the end of Non-Cooperation movement¹ and subsequent disintegration of the unique Bengali nationalism due to differentiated modernization process,² oriented around pre-modern community identity lines on rural socio-economic context. They took up socio-moral-economic upliftment schemes for an ideal rural regeneration process, rather than implement-

ing any direct political scheme or dreaming for political *Swaraj* only. It was effectively the third emerging moment for Self-Help in Bengal after Hindu *Mela* and *Swadeshi* Movement period. By riding the occasional successes of these Constructive Work organizations, Congress, as an organization, still remained a popular household name in rural areas despite the appalling performance during Civil Disobedience movement in Bengal. This movement and subsequent years of 1930's are very often dubbed as the years of Congress' derogation. However, the frequent association of these Constructive Work organizers with political decision-making process did hamper their objectives. And ultimately, the top down disciplinary approach of the national Constructive Work organizations neglected provincial realities far too often. Bengal, being a curious case of identity politics ultimately pushed the Constructive Workers to these local realities which resulted in a total collapse of Congress' rural base in late 1930's.

The nationalist school of historians has glorified Gandhi to the level of a saintly figure and presented him as the true salvation bearer of India's Independence movement. Cambridge school of historians has generally seen him as furthering the patron-client relational bond for gradual equal share in colonial administration and power politics. This resulted in Congress' gradual claim of better political alternative as against their British counterparts. Subaltern historians, initially, tried to look through his messianic image as conceived in popular consciousness. However in the subsequent years, a shift has been made towards an understanding of his overall philosophical and implicational approaches in a hegemonic way. The study of his political philosophy and theoretical apparatus has always been a popular theme of analysis by political scientists. In recent years, a new trend, first triggered by French semiotician Roland Barthes during his years of interaction with Gandhi, has emerged regarding symbolism of Gandhi's politics. His influential personality and legacy has given him bunch of renowned historians as his biographers. Studies in recent years have been done on his global legacy and today, Gandhi is a brand name for pacifist or ecologist movements. His legacy as a mass leader and the father of the Indian nation has been much elevated at popular public media through biographical movies made on him by influential directors of both Hollywood and Bollywood. Thus much of the historiography and popular media productions of India's nationalist movement has adamantly skirted the significance of Gandhi's Constructive Work, of which *Khadi* formed a

vital part in gathering up his mass base. Issues such as *Swadeshi*, *Khadi*, cottage industries, village reconstruction and other related concerns falling under the generic term of Constructive Work occupy a bulk of Gandhi's writings and speeches. Yet surprisingly, it was the political engagement that has remained the focus of scholarly work at the cost of marginalization of his real life vocation. Not much is seriously available in scholarly analysis on Gandhi's Constructive Work. Much has been written on his philosophy of *Swaraj* but less has been discussed through proper historical analysis regarding its practical implication, namely Constructive Work program.

This thesis does not aim for such grandiose a project as to analyze Gandhi's Constructive Work program at a national level, but it aims to do so at through the smaller lens of Bengal. If we look through the brief historiography of works on Congress' activities in this province, we get to know about works mainly based on Calcutta and its immediate hinterlands, where Congress' high politics received its smoothest socio-economic base. For instance, J. H. Broomfield's *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*³ has stressed the self-seeking role of an undifferentiated elite group that he called the *bhadralok*. In Gitasree Bandyopadhyay's *Constraints in Bengal Politics, 1921–1941*,⁴ the author has not stepped beyond the history of Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) and its confrontation with the Government. In Chandi Charan Biswas' *Bengal's Response to Gandhi*,⁵ the author has explained the ideological and political aversion of Bengali Congress leaders and nationalist circle in general to the principles of Gandhi on the basis of their close link with the revolutionary ideals and movements. Leonard A. Gordon's essay, 'Bengal's Gandhi: A Study in Modern Indian Regionalism' in *Bengal's Regional Identity*,⁶ edited by David Kopf and Edward C. Dimock has drawn a broader view on the difficult relationship between Gandhi and Bengali political leaders. However, Gordon too has not attempted to cross the border of conventional nationalist politics but rather has concentrated on the prevalent political concepts and factions among BPCC leaders and, in general, the urban middle class. Rajat Kanta Ray's *Urban Roots of Indian Nationalism: Pressure Groups and Conflict of Interests in Calcutta City Politics, 1875–1939*⁷ has followed the same approach with narrower confinement within high politics of Calcutta *bhadraloks* and thus, echoed arguments of Broomfield in many ways. Gautam Chattopadhyay's *Bengal's Electoral Politics and Freedom Struggle, 1862–1947*⁸ can

be added in the same list of *bhadralok* oriented arguments. A different work on Bengal's nationalism and politics by Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875–1927*,⁹ has tried to answer the broader question of Bengal's total disintegration process in terms of politics of nationalism by both pulling together hinterlands and city alike. Though it partially criticizes Broomfield's argument, it still lacks a detailed analysis of the other half of the nationalism in Bengal, namely, the followers of Gandhi and their Constructive Work organizations. The current thesis has tried to address this gap through a study that primarily oriented around Gandhi's followers and organizers of his Constructive Work in Bengal.

Chapter 2 tries to show how Bengal already had a legacy for philosophy of action, popularized in a national level during the twentieth century by Gandhi. The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalist thinkers preceded Gandhi as ideological heralds in Bengal. This legacy in both philosophical and implicational contexts ultimately generated a unique Bengali assimilation where provincial individualities and Gandhi's principles were situated side-by-side with sporadic instances of synthesis. Chapter 3 mainly deals with philosophy behind Gandhi's *Swadeshi*, *Swaraj* and Constructive Work and its various revolutionary and organizational outputs at national level. The context and objective of Gandhi's Basic National Education scheme for eradication of unemployment issue has been discussed in nutshell, followed by narratives of All India *Khaddar* Board, All-India Spinners' Association (AISA), *Gandhi Seva Sangh* and All-India Village Industries Association (AIVIA). Chapter 4 primarily tries to construct the main argument of this thesis. But lack of time for archival work has led me to confine my arguments mainly two of such biggest organizations in Bengal, *Khadi Pratishthan* and *Abhay Ashram*.

The project is big but the duration of my MPhil course is not. Therefore, I am forced to confine myself in many areas due to lack of time for more archival work and secondary readings. A more comprehensive and all encompassing narrativization of this whole hypothesis will be attempted generously during my PhD. The methodology of this work is primarily empirical, based on Intelligence Branch reports and Home Department Political Branch Confidential files. These are corroborated with relevant newspaper reports and few valuable memoirs. The comprehensive collection of primary sources in PDF format at South Asia Archive, availability of printed primary sources at National Digital Archive and Digital Library of India,

collection of personal letters at *Sodpur Khadi Pratishthan's* official website, collection of rare books in National Library and Asiatic Society Library have helped me immensely in giving a more cohesive structure to the various threads of my argument. And lastly, the whole work would have been doomed to complete failure without the help of the hundred volumes of Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG).

End Notes

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9. Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal*.

Chapter 2

Ideological Harbingers of Gandhi's Constructive Work

Pliny once wrote that vast sums in cash or kind were paid annually to India for the purchase of manufactured goods. In 1787, Sir Henry Cotton commented, "The yearly export of Dacca muslin to England amounted to Rs. 3,00,00,000 approximately." According to Lord Clive, during the reign of Sirajaudullah, Murshidabad was "as prosperous and rich as the city of London."¹ Usual depictions in Mughal chronicles and travel accounts of foreign travelers indicate that peace and plenty reigned supreme in their self-sufficient villages alongside health, wealth, contentment, and leisure.² Thus, the India of these accounts and statements was a flourishing land with a large and prosperous economy, consisting of self-sustaining egalitarian village communities which produced their own subsistence. The subsequent economic stagnation along with increasing poverty and inequality is remarked on in the traditional historical analysis of both Indian economic nationalists and Marxist anti-imperialist third world historians or left nationalists. It is viewed that British rule, by its revenue policy, forced production for the market and thus, broke up these communities. Production for the market had not been profitable enough and consequently led to widespread rural debt which jeopardized the economy. Thus while on one hand, deindustrialization added to rural poverty by pushing many former artisans into agriculture, on the other, it gave control of the land to the moneyed people who were, by nature, averse to productive investment. Here, the left na-

tionalist view can be defined in terms of two propositions — firstly, that both decline and growth were derived from such global factors as world trade and colonial strategies; secondly and equally importantly that the decline outweighed the growth. Both Marx and the Marxist tradition in development studies cited, along with other effects, the ruination of Indian textile artisans as an example of the adverse effects of this Western contact.

Revisionists criticized this traditional theory by suggesting that the rural economy was not jeopardized and that traditional industry did not decline. According to them, the traditional industry changed in organization and character, and survived due to increased competition and market segmentation. These changes, in their view, shaped the future course of Indian industrialization. In contrast to the destructive impact that has been proposed by traditional historians, the revisionist approach considers the creative impact to be more important.³ However, this revisionist analysis could not deny that the subsequent changes in the formational structure of the traditional village society did happen. Though they establish argumentatively the changes in pre-modern labor division and industrial organization, in many instances, they confine themselves too narrowly within few selected sectors, namely, the handloom industry. Thus, besides India's growing economic backwardness and increasing debt, the disintegration of previous rural societal forms became a major concern in Indian nationalist discourse. Nationalist movements of every kind, in general, try to show the nation and its legacy actually as a product of a conjuncture, modernity substantiated by the notion of revival of a lost antiquity. So, although a modern phenomenon, nationalism must speak a traditional language of communities.⁴ And in this process of tracing the antiquity for legitimization, an "invented tradition" is always born.⁵ Following this inventory process for a valid legacy, the late nineteenth-century economic thought of India's anti-colonial discourse provided impetus to another popular theme of subsequent discourse, namely, the romanticized traditional village society. The dysfunctional situation it acquired after coming into contact with Western administration became a major theme of discussion in late nineteenth century and continued to gain more attention throughout early twentieth century. The Hindu *Mela* tradition of late nineteenth century and the *Swadeshi* movement of early twentieth century in Bengal had drawn much of their thematic inspirations from this discourse. Ben-

gal, being an enriched hub of late nineteenth-century anti-colonial thinkers and succeeding nationalists of twentieth century, provided many juncture points of ideological innovations and textual discoveries. This can be seen in the writings of Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Swami Vivekananda that resulted in emergence of a new concept of regeneration, which came to be recognized as Self-Help. The culminating end came with Gandhi who addressed the bulk of his major political and socio-economic issues from the above-mentioned angles, albeit in a more all-encompassing manner.

The following chapter is an honest effort to show that both conceptual and practical heralds of Gandhian Constructive Work had already been there in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century background of enlightened nationalist thought and Bengal, in these initial days of germination, probably provided the richest background. First, this chapter attempts to highlight on the Drain Theory, a late nineteenth-century brain child of anti-colonial thinkers and how it had initiated the central theme of romanticized and essentialized traditional Indian village society in the nationalist discourse. The theory came into practice with endeavors of Hindu *Mela*, a typical product of romantic nationalism in the late nineteenth-century Bengal whose future legacy was carried forward by the *Swadeshi* movement. These two points of convergence between theory and practice in Bengal's history of nationalist movement witnessed the emergence of the conceptual practice of Self-Help which greatly impacted Gandhian Constructive Work of twentieth century. Moreover, the chapter also tries to address how Bengal's late nineteenth-century nationalist tradition of *Nishkam Karma* and other related themes, propagated by Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Swami Vivekananda had preceded the Gandhian concepts of *Charkha*, *Khadi* and Constructive Work.

2.1 Drain Theory and Economic Nationalism

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, there was an ongoing debate between two opposing school of economists on the nature of the economic process that India underwent during the British rule. One school, consisting of British officials and writers, declared that India was growing more prosperous as well as undergoing economic development as a byproduct of

Pax Britannica's modern progressive skills. The areas, in general, through which this progress became possible, according to them, were law and order, an efficient administration, an honest and efficient bureaucracy, development of railways, growing commerce, increased irrigation and increase in the area of cultivation. This optimistic side of development faced additional but unavoidable hindrances, in their opinion, due to issues such as rapidly increasing population, India's financial weakness or its incapacity because of its poverty, shortage of internal capital or inadequate capital formation within the country. Additionally backwardness of Indian customs, habits and social institutions was seen by some of them as another obstacle to development.⁶

The other side, as suggested by Bipan Chandra, though not truly nationalist, was at least staunchly anti-imperialist.⁷ Their main demands were based on fundamental changes in the existing economic relations between Indian and Britain. This made their economic demands radically nationalist while their political demands remained moderate in tone.⁸ Through their demands, the first sustained articulation of nationalism in South Asia crystallized around the notion of a territorially specified economic collective which eventually evolved into a national political economy in the 1870's and 1880's.⁹ These arguments subsequently clustered around a concrete form of theoretical aspect, popularly known as the Drain Theory, which later resulted in the economic nationalism of early twentieth century and the Deindustrialization theory of left nationalists in late twentieth century. Thus Ramesh Chandra Dutt's classic weaver thump story in his two volumes of *Economic History of India*, a seminal late nineteenth-century text on Drain Theory, left such a deep and indelible impact that it was preached by twentieth-century nationalist leaders in their mass propaganda work.¹⁰ The Irish co-operative movement of late nineteenth and early twentieth century also represented a sophisticated political economy¹¹ like the Drain Theory. These two subsequently provided an influential ideological platform for nationalists in both Ireland and India as they anticipated some form of political independence.

Though the ancestry of this theory can be traced back to Raja Rammohan Roy,¹² it was a small band of Maharashtrian intellectuals who first made the economic drain, in all its implications, the principal target of their bitter attack on British colonial rule in the early 1840's. According to them, the main

constituent elements of the drain were decline of indigenous industry, transfer of wealth, excessive taxation, over-assessment of land revenue, unemployment of Indians in important civil and military positions, and excessively costly character of British administration.¹³ Rammohun Roy, the supposed ideological harbinger of the theory, was in search of a modernized Indian economy and polity with a viable rural base. What he had in mind was a process of modernization that involved the vast masses of rural population through whom the growth impulse could travel upward and forward on a massive scale. He however had a vision of future India's village communities as the renovated and restructured nuclei of a modern economic organization. He was the first Indian intellectual who voiced his complaint against 'tribute' system.¹⁴ Later in the century, when Dadabhai Naoroji spoke of the colonial economic drain primarily as an internal and external drain of the poverty-stricken India of the villages and only secondarily as the drain of the prosperous India of the towns, and thus reflected through these two on the negative conditions of modern economic progress in India, his general context was similar to that of Rammohun Roy. In the 1870's, Bankimchandra Chatterjee had written acutely about the misery of Bengal peasants, foregrounding their exploitation by Indian landlords, in a series of essays which were collected as *Samya* (equality).¹⁵ Later in his life he admitted that substantial wealth was probably being transferred to Britain in the form of payments to colonial administrators, for which India was getting nothing in return. He was aware of the fact of deindustrialization but did not possess, and could not construct for himself, a conceptual apparatus.¹⁶ Romesh Chandra Dutt, while assessing India's overall economic backwardness, discoursed on the evils of high revenue assessments under the British system of land tenure and the related problems of mass poverty and famines as part of an integrated whole. Being well-known for his historical survey of India's industrial decline, not only was he a strong advocate of India's industrial development, but he was also vocal about rejuvenation of the small scale cottage industries as a kind of insurance against famine.¹⁷

The slow but steady industrial decline that had started around the mid-1820's had reached a crisis point by the 1860's.¹⁸ Spurred on by repeated famines and the increasingly perceptible dissonance between Britain's prosperity and advance, and India's misery and backwardness, the nineteenth-century Indian intellectuals turned towards a self-conscious nationalism, which often placed the poverty of the country at

the heart of its critique of foreign rule. Such emphasis persisted in diverse forms throughout the colonial era and beyond. It is from this focus on Indian poverty that patterns of thinking and eventually action emerged that resulted in seeking remedies in varied recognizably developmental directions.¹⁹ Even the Gandhian model, which is sometimes designated as anti-developmental for its rejection of industrialized modernity, was perhaps not all that different. It too was based on a passionate concern for mass poverty and tried to combine periodic mass campaigns with sustained village level Constructive Work, geared to promote self-reliance.²⁰

The developmental directions of these anti-colonial, anti-imperialist thinkers were criticized by Bipan Chandra. According to him, the main issue they raised was not that of per capita income or destruction of handicrafts but of economic development.²¹ They all, in his opinion, without exception, accepted that the English introduced some structural changes and nearly all of them welcomed these changes as the entry point of progressive wind from the West. Modern industry, in their view, was necessary, if the diverse people of India were to be united into a single nation on the basis of common interests. The anti-imperialist writers had not used "economic decay" to mean decay of handicrafts but signified the arrested growth of India's industrialization and modernization. None of them had really condemned the destruction of the pre-British economic structure, except nostalgically and out of some sort of sympathy.²² The content of a letter by Ramesh Chandra Dutt on 16th September, 1886, to Bankimchandra Chatterjee, two stalwarts of the late nineteenth-century anti-imperialist intellectual circle in Bengal, substantiated this view quite amply.²³

However it cannot be completely refuted that these anti-imperialist economic thinkers of the late nineteenth century also believed that the traditional, indigenous handicraft industries would play an important role in the economy for a long time to come, especially in providing employment to the millions.²⁴ Therefore, they made the protection, rehabilitation, reorganization and modernization of such industries an important part of their economic program. All of these influenced Gandhi in many of his socio-economic policies for rural upliftment through revival and rejuvenation of lost village and cottage industries and his national emblem, *Khadi*. Even the formulation of the economic content of the famous independence

pledge of 26th January, 1930 amply demonstrated that its substance was derived from the Indian economic thought of the last century as it accused British government for deprivation and exploitation, for revenue extraction and economic ruin, for destruction of village and cottage industries, for differences of customary duties in import and export.²⁵

2.2 Nationalist Discourse and Image of an Ideal Traditional Indian Village Community

The village has long been viewed as a convenient entry point for understanding the traditional Indian society. It has been seen as a signifier of the authentic native life, a social and cultural unit uncorrupted by outside influence.²⁶ Ronald Inden has rightly pointed out that in the Western opinion, though most other civilizations of the Orient were primarily agrarian economies as well, it was only the Indian society that was essentialized into a land of village.²⁷ The caste system and the village communities were perhaps the two most important categories that the colonial ethnography deployed rather extensively to make sense of Indian society and to distinguish it from the West where state held the central position. However, it is assumed that most religions in agrarian societies of the East probably followed a similar logic of ascribing the power of the legislative constitution of society to divine authority, with a crucial mediating role being played by religious intellectuals²⁸ while marginalizing the power and authority of the state. It was difficult to reconstruct a political history of India due to lack of empirical and documentary evidence. *Samaj* or society was therefore prioritized over polity and seen as providing continuity with the past, essential for bringing the collective self into existence. The politically and economically decentralized self-sustained village community of the pre-modern era facilitated that concept of continuation.²⁹ Indian nationalism, as argued effectively by Partha Chatterjee, although premised on an opposition to colonial rule, remained ultimately contained by the same dominant conceptual frameworks that it repudiated.³⁰ Following this acceptance of naïve essentialization, the village became a central category in the nationalist imagination.

It became impossible to imagine an idea of India as a unified nation without its seven hundred thousand villages where eighty percent of its population dwelled at that time.³¹ Villages of traditional India were portrayed in this nationalist discourse as self-governing and self-sufficient units. Barter economy prevailed; all trade and credit transactions were based on human relationships rather than on mere profit and loss balance sheet accounts.³² Different castes, including lower orders, followed their respective professions and rejoiced in simple amusements, which in turn provided nostalgic representation of supposed enduring bases of social unity.³³ These heterogeneities that were given to Hindu society in caste were not supposed to be erased by the abstractions of a homogenizing ideal of citizenship in a nation-state.³⁴ But in place of this asymmetrical apparatus of pre-modern state–society power division, British brought a highly centralized, technologically effective apparatus of control.³⁵ This penetration into a subsistence agrarian society eroded patron-client relationships that despite being unequal, provided minimum security for all. The disruption of this security and the increasing differentiation is then seen to be followed by rural instability.³⁶

This image of an idyllic, self-contained, craft work producing village community life which remained constant irrespective of dynastic changes or any other external forces was a central theme of discussion by intellectuals in metropolitan as well.³⁷ In Great Exhibition of 1851 and Colonial & Imperial Exhibition of 1886 at Liberty's Department Store, London, India was portrayed as a timeless, unchanging, ancient land, dotted with jungles native and village *bazaars*, at once geographically and temporally removed from the hectic pace of industrial life. For armchair anthropologist, Sir Henry Maine, the Indian village thus existed at an earlier, pre-capitalist stage of Britain's own evolution from tradition to modernity.³⁸ This view also dominated the late Victorian art critics and reformers in their preservationist approaches to India's cultural products. Among the most prominent of these figures was George Birdwood, art critic and collector, who attributed the greatness of India's cultural products to the social structures of the Indian village.³⁹ By adopting these images and practices, Gandhi consolidated his commercial, political and spiritual vision for the nation into simple yet powerful physical form. During the twenties and the thirties of twentieth century, the peak hour of Gandhi's Constructive Work program, it was claimed by many nationalists and Constructive Workers that many cottage industries including *Khadi* had an authentic legacy deeply entrenched in

India's traditional past and should be revived in due time. These craftworks and their techniques, like their beholder traditional village community, remained uninterrupted and thus, in their views, had an inherent quality of representing India's socio-economic reality.⁴⁰ The institution of *Varna*, which was seen as an exemplary social formation based on equality, started gaining momentum in late nineteenth-century Romantic nationalist discourse following the colonial framework formation of indigenous episteme. Gandhi later in his essentialized remark also did not see any social hierarchies inherent in *Varna* system. Rather to him, it was horizontally divided. In Gandhi's romanticized institution of *Varna*, one's position or allotted duties are not externally induced but are in accordance with one's nature. For Gandhi, the system of *Varna* is based on the fact that the society consists of different types of works which cannot be fulfilled by people having the same qualities, aptitudes and gifts. Similarly people vary in regard to their attainments, qualities and aptitudes. Hence the institution of *Varna* appropriates inner qualities and skills of human beings with different types of works in external world. Hence, as an occupational division, *Varna* is the natural basis of social organization to make people competent to give their best service to the community and society.⁴¹

European history, based on state-centric aggrandizement, was set negatively in the nationalist discourse of early twentieth century against the Indian civilization, a symbol of syncretic unification, preached through its community life.⁴² Bhudev Mukhopdhyay, one of the original anti-colonial thinkers of the late nineteenth century saw community life of Indian civilization as its central locus with similar opinions.⁴³ It was perhaps in 1894 that Gandhi for the first time invoked the idea of the Indian village as a political symbol. He counterposed the village to the city and presented the village life as a critique of, and an alternative to, the modern western culture and civilization. Gandhi's emphasis on the dependency of cities on villages for supply of food and raw materials which happened to be an ancient nature of city formation, since the time of Roman Empire, became a wide theme of discussion among active rural reconstruction organizers.⁴⁴ Liang Shuming, the towering figure of Chinese Rural Reconstruction movement in the first half of the twentieth century, had similar views on rural-urban relations. He believed that the traditional Chinese culture had completely disappeared in the cities. In the countryside too, he felt, it was almost dead, but there, at least, its roots were still alive in the memories of old people. Unlike their Western coun-

terparts, Chinese cities consumed more than they produced, according to Liang, so the urban population, and the intellectuals in particular, were “eating the blood and sweat of the peasants.”⁴⁵ The opinion that one serious downfall in village production would give a blow to urban consumption and lifestyle, was supported both by Liang Shuming and Gandhi. Though Gandhi continued to see village as an alternative way of living, he also found many faults with the existing lifestyle of the rural people in the Indian countryside.⁴⁶ This resulted in a genuine concern for actual existing villages of India which in turn gave emphasis on the ways and means of reforming them.⁴⁷

2.3 Ideological Precursors and Forerunners of Gandhi in Bengal

Drawing on religious texts and, in the process, nationalizing them is not an unfamiliar practice in the construction of nationalism. In this case, Gandhi with his deep admiration for the *Bhagavad Gita* (or *Gita*) was a worthy successor of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengali nationalist thinkers.⁴⁸ The first attempt to draw the *Gita* into the nationalist discourse in colonial India to outline an alternative moral foundation for the nation was initiated by Bankimchandra Chatterjee. This set up a trend that was to be followed by generations to come. Thus, he had conceived his agenda of national reconstruction in a religious idiom. Swami Vivekananda with his known admiration for *Anandamath* gave that agenda a practical shape through service to humanity and a self-denying dedication to the national cause.⁴⁹ This approach was merged by Gandhi into his ideals of Non-Violence and *Satyagraha* and thus all fragmented and interconnected elements of religion came under the unifying roof of national regeneration.

The nation was elevated and transformed into a religious icon by Bankim and, through him, became a being that demands devotion, service and sacrifice.⁵⁰ *Bhakti*, as outlined by *Gita*, Bankim argued, did not merely involve an unwavering faith in God. Rather, it was imbued with an incessant love and benevolence towards the distressed and thus was more of a social attribute. Gandhi's *Bhakti* also was free from all connection with superficial emotionalism or mythological sentimentality, deeply rooted in moral action. Actions, according to Bankim, had to be performed without desire, with pure intellect and com-

plete involvement of the heart. Thus, from it arose his conception of *Karma Yoga*, perfection of the totality of the faculties through *Bhakti* which in its epitome became *Nishkam Karma*. Bankim's *Nishkam Karmi*, a practitioner of *Nishkam Karma*, would perform actions for the benefit of people, as worship of god. Bankim also argued that the *Gita* regarded Non-Violence as the supreme virtue and between Non-Violence and Truth, Non-Violence was regarded as the higher dharma by him.⁵¹ In Gandhi's opinion, however, these two belonged to an equal and reciprocally interconnected footing. According to Bankim, the active *Sanyasa* that the *Gita* expounded raised actions to the level of duties and responsibilities. This set of duties and responsibilities to the family, society and community had always been equal to *Dharma* in India. Bhudev Mukhopadhyay once commented that Indian society had always been more concerned with the general well-being of all the containing elements than the pursuit of self-interest, the quest for wealth and power through ruthless competition.⁵² This was further explicitly preached by Rabindranath Tagore in his *Swadeshi Samaj* speech, "Particularly in our country, in which society rests on the family, if the core duties of domestic life is destroyed, the *Dharma* that holds society together loses its main support and that poison attacks the very heart of the society."⁵³ Gandhi's concept of *Swadeshi* attributed love toward neighbors in forms of duties and responsibilities and thus the Indian idea of *Dharma* provided basic conceptual echelon for Gandhian Constructive Work. On this basis, the state-centric character of rights was contrasted with *Dharma* in India, defined as righteous life.⁵⁴ For Gandhi though, these particular duties and responsibilities became the true source of rights in Indian context.⁵⁵

The tradition of *Nishkam Karma* and its performer, the active *Sanyasi* or *Nishkam Karmi*, was best defined by Swami Vivekananda, who made his own annotations and additions. For Vivekananda too, *Nishkam Karma* or non-attachment was the core teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita*. For him, however, the *Gita* put greater emphasis on economic concerns as central to the religion through the concept of *Daridra Narayana* (the divine in the poor). The Indian nation of his dream was to be constructed on this economic foundation of the *Gita* religion. His *Nishkam Karma* favored a bridge of mutual compassion between those who were intellectually, ethically and economically strong and the poor, who needed them the most. The weak, in his opinion, needed to follow the path of the learned, receiving guidance from

them. Gandhi's ascetic activists, namely, professional *Satyagrahis* and Constructive Workers approachability attributed same principles for their rural counterparts. It should be noted that Vivekananda's non-attachment was neither disinterestedness nor purposelessness rather only denoted the absence of self and motive in action.⁵⁶ It was through this concept of non-attachment, that Gandhi evolved his concept of *Anasakti* that further propagated two important notions in his nationalist discourse, the *Satyagraha* and Non-Cooperation.⁵⁷ The path of the *Gita* for Gandhi was neither that of contemplation nor of devotion but that of desireless and unattached action.⁵⁸ *Anasakti's* desireless attachment for patriotism, universal love and active engagement with the world seemed to be corroborating Bankim's active *Sanyasa*. The origin of Gandhi's concept of professional *Satyagrahis*, namely Constructive Workers as the ideal *Desh Sevaks* lies in the term *Seva* whose roots are traceable to India's religious past. The duties of a *Sevaka*, namely *Seva*, traditionally rights performed to divinity, gained its popular and secular connotation around 1908. Amritlal V. Thakkar wrote to his brothers on 25th January, 1914, a member of the Servants of India Society, an organization established by Gandhi's political guru Gopal Krishna Gokhale, that India needed full-time devoted workers for nation building. though the organization was purely upper caste elitist vanguard in structure.⁵⁹ Social service in Gokhale's opinion stood for a spiritualization that predisposed people to duty that could only be achieved by active political participation. The points of convergence with Gandhi were performance of duty and observance of morality. These were described by him in convertible terms for his philosophy of action.⁶⁰ Therefore, Gandhi's definition and conception for full-time dedicated Congress and Constructive Work *Sevaks* were germinated from these precursors. Gandhi always preferred to use the word "service" to describe activity, and another significant term was "constructive" used as an adjective describing work, activity or program. We get a sense of the relationship between "constructive" work and *Seva* by mapping the use of the adjective "constructive" in Gandhi's correspondences.⁶¹ Therefore, Gandhian Constructive Workers and Constructive Work organizations followed the path of desireless social service for national regeneration based on Non-Violence and Truth.

Swami Vivekanada converted the life-denying philosophy of mystics into a practical creed of universal applicability by relating it to normal human experience. It meant revival of India's true religion which con-

sisted of fearlessness, love and selfless action. Its root was spirituality which Vivekananda characterized as 'lifeblood' of India.⁶² For Gandhi too, politics without spirituality and religious morality was like a soul-less icon of divinity. There had been an implicit recognition of an existing disjuncture between morality and politics. Gandhi's unique utilization of the concept of Non-Violence and Truth bridged that gap. To achieve this convergence, he introduced for the first time in the Indian political practice, the idea of soul force that, according to him, could and should operate alongside the body force.⁶³ The notion of soul or spirit is also present in some Western nationalisms, notably German, but extreme anti-materialist and anti-technology sentiments, hostility to competitiveness, efforts to root a mobilizational politics in indigenous cultures, and an acutely voluntarist sensibility are particularly characteristic of some varieties of Japanese and Chinese nationalism.⁶⁴ This notion of soul is also reflected in his autobiography where it was a quest of truth by a soul.⁶⁵ Thus unlike Vivekananda's philosophy of desireless action of spirituality, separated from politics, Gandhi's ideology of a spiritual force acquired the possibility of a political process. Thus in the eventual contextual appreciation of national movement, it developed its own organizational principles of political practice and became something more than just a utopian doctrine.⁶⁶ And in this process, practical implication of an ideational goal, the salvation of soul could also be achieved. This byproduct became adoptable to him through the lower point of view of service to people. This pragmatically contextualized the germinating locus of Gandhi's concept of political action, combined with service, Non-Violent action and soul force.⁶⁷ This made it possible for Gandhi to offer his alternatives for *Swadeshi* not as passive refuges from the modern world but as active challenges to its most self-confident themes.

Gandhi is often regarded as the first Indian intellectual to provide a fundamentally cut-throat criticism of Western civilization in Indian nationalist discourse. But here also, he was preceded by Bengali anti-colonial or nationalist thinkers of late nineteenth century who in their admiration for the West had remained conspicuously selective. Though vaguely in most instances, they nonetheless hinted at some real sickness of Western civilization which was later used by Gandhi in his refutation of modern nation-state's superiority. In the general consensus of late nineteenth century, India was portrayed as a country with spiritual and moral superiority that had nothing to learn from the West except in fields of practical mat-

ters. Bhudev Mukhopadhyay expressed sharp criticism of modern European statecraft but showed deep admiration for two achievements of European modernity, namely, political economy, the European science of improving the wealth of nations, and the growth of modern science.⁶⁸ The sentiment of religious superiority appeared because of direct confrontational debate with Western missionaries.

European civilization's desperation for consumerism appeared to be a very flawed aspect to a person like Keshab Chandra Sen, who was otherwise renowned for his vehement admiration for the West. Vivekananda wrote approvingly of the sophisticated pleasures of Parisian life, but was repelled by the logical climax of Western consumerism. Materialism, in the eyes of such observers, was not an abstract description to rubbish the West, but almost a palpable sickness of the soul which they found truly disgusting. In their view, the factory industry on which the whole structure of consumption was based reduced the worker to a mindless automaton and the consumer to an equally mindless slave of habit.⁶⁹ Gandhi later blamed this system of social production as the devilish source of modern imperialism. According to him, it was the limitless desire for great production and greater consumption which kept up this spirit of ruthless competition. This ran the entire system and impelled these countries to seek colonial possessions which could be exploited for economic purposes. Gandhi stated this position quite emphatically as early as his most original political tract *Hind Swaraj* (1909) and held on to it all his life.⁷⁰ Unlike motives related to economic aggression and oppressive exclusive nationalism pillared on a homogenous organic community in the modern state, the nation he talked about instead was a pluralistic political community.⁷¹ Bhudev Mukhopadhyay's rejection of the Western proposals of modernity on four fundamental grounds was also later elaborated by Gandhi in his *Critique of modern Western civilization*. Bhudev's grounds for refutation of the Western civilization was twofold: the depletion of emotional bonds within families which were rendered illegitimately contractual by the capitalist modern society; the destruction of the sense of community through the rendering of human relations competitive and aggressive. He also criticized the modern Western state, which he felt were primarily effective engines of comprehensive war against other nation states, for the quest for a narrow self-interest drove them to deny self-determination, consequently justifying modern imperialism.⁷²

Unlike other Indian critic of the West and their limited ideational opposition, Gandhi saw nothing worth praising in its modern civilization. His prescription was that Indians should reject it totally and fall back on the tradition of India's primordial villages and high moral ideals.⁷³ Leo Tolostoy once wrote, "What does it mean that thirty thousand people, not athletes but rather weak and ill-looking, have enslaved 200 million of vigorous, clever, strong, freedom-loving people? Do not the figures make it clear that not the English but the Indians have enslaved themselves?"⁷⁴ Gandhi agreed to this point and according to him, Indians themselves were responsible for enslavement as they embraced capitalism and its associated legal and political structures. Now, the railways, lawyers and doctors, he believed were impoverishing the country. Gandhi was at pains to point out that India's struggle could not be against the British but against the civilization that they belonged to.⁷⁵ His remedy for national regeneration alongside eradication of this ailing contagion of Western civilization was moral and utopian one. He suggested that Indians must eschew greed and lust for consumption and should revert to the village-based self-sufficient economy of the ancient times. His *Hind Swaraj*, though generally considered either a criticism of Western civilization or a criticism of civil society, provided primarily a theory of salvation from this precarious downfall of humanity, not only for Indians but also for Britain. Thus, for Ashis Nandy, he appears as a counter modernist critic of the West.⁷⁶

The Gandhian idea of Self-Help which was deployed in theory and practice by his acolyte organizations, had ideological forerunners in Bengal. During Hindu *Mela* period, the idea not only revolved around the emerging echelons of economic nationalism and indigenous endeavors, but witnessed also its association with the budding practice of Bengali physical culture.⁷⁷ This practice of physical prowess had subsequently evolved into Bengali *Samiti* and *Akhara* culture of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Introduction of indigenous goods exhibition and fair through the use of hitherto prevalent traditional and vernacular mediums was a remarkable herald for future Constructive *Swadeshi* schemes. However, being a completely isolated case of its time, it could neither produce any blueprint for real rural uplift work nor could it facilitate a single event or branch in village.⁷⁸ Despite these utter limitations, it initiated, though too narrowly, a trend of bridging the gap between two different sections of the society, namely

the elites and the masses, later followed by every Self-Help workers. It was the first emerging moment of Self-Help in Bengal under the influential wave of the era, namely, Romantic Nationalism.

During *Swadeshi* period, physical prowess culture received a definite upper hand during 1908 and subsequent years for growing association with underground revolutionary activities. Before 1908, many of the future revolutionaries were attracted to the village level Constructive Work schemes, which for the first time, planned and preached at many *Swadeshi* conferences and meetings. This period also witnessed urban educated young volunteers participating full-time in rural level organizations for upliftment work. Thus, for the first time, the gap was bridged not just in theory, but in practice as well. This wave of enthusiasm received serious setback during and after 1908, due to declining enthusiasm, disillusionment among youths, rise of underground revolutionary nationalism, sporadic outburst of rural violence and ambivalent attitude of its preachers. Most importantly, Self-Help's sphere of influence in ideological and practical notions remained remotely limited in this stage of emerging moment. Only medium-scale economic enterprises and one national education scheme expressed this idea but they differed neither in aims nor in ends from their colonial counterparts. Rather the only alternative they were able to produce, was an indigenous banner, namely, *Swadeshi* movement. This was the second emerging moment of Self-Help in Bengal.⁷⁹

Gandhi's *Khadi*, revival of village and cottage industries and Constructive Work program including Basic National Education scheme of 1937 finally stroked the canvas as the third emerging moment of Self-Help, not only at the national level but in Bengal as well. This phase included not only a promise for constitutional independence but a pledge for socio-economic independence was also preached through a blueprint of moral uplift for village societies. Gandhi also used exhibitory and other indigenous vernacular propaganda mediums like his predecessors. In this phase following its precursors, a notion of Self-Help at individual level, balancing the parity between mind and body, was widely recognized. The only difference it had with previous physical prowess culture that this parity between mind and body was based on the principles of non-violence unlike the violent roots of the preceding one. In Britain as well this idea of Self-Help was gaining momentum popularity at that time. Samuel Smiles in his work, "Self-Help, with illustrations of conduct and perseverance" conveyed a message, "the duty of helping one's self in the highest

sense involves the helping of one's neighbors."⁸⁰ This message can be corroborated not only with the idea of Self-Help during the times of the *Swadeshi* movement but with Gandhi's concept of *Swadeshi* also. Even his book discussed themes⁸¹ which are relatable with Constructive *Swadeshi's* spirit of Humble Trustees, Bread labor, Hygiene and Sanitation, Practical and Technical Education, Non-Possession, *Asbram's* routine life, Social Duties, Fearlessness and Truthfulness.

2.4 Hindu *Mela* Tradition and the First Emerging Moment of Self-Help in Bengal

The relatively neglected and fascinating generation of the late nineteenth century witnessed the composition of numerous patriotic songs, dramas full of nationalist ideas, *Swadeshi* endeavors and even some talk of boycott, secret societies of young men and peasant rallies organized by the Indian association.⁸² It was the first emerging moment of Self-Help and *Swadeshi* in Bengali. In 1865, the Tagores of Jorasanko published the National Paper, a weekly in English which eventually became the organ of the annual nationalist gathering, the Hindu *Mela*.⁸³ Hindu *Mela*, which continued from 1867 to 1880, was inspired by "A Prospectus of the society for the Promotion of National Feeling" prepared by Rajnarain Basu in 1866. This subsequently influenced Nabogopal Mitra to launch a national fair better known as Hindu *Mela*.⁸⁴ Initially referred to as the *Jatiyo Mela* or *Chaitra Mela* or the *Chaitra Sankranti Mela*, it came to be labeled the Hindu *Mela* from 1870's onwards.⁸⁵ During this period the *Mela* was restricted to different venues within Calcutta. Five years after its inception, however *mufassil* counterparts to the *Mela* were instituted at Baruipur and Dinajapur. The *Mela* also precipitated other nationalist activities like the National Society (*Jatiya Sabha*) in 1870 and the National School in 1872. Apart from regular lectures and songs, the *Mela* also exhibited agricultural produce, animals, bird and handicraft items and machinery.⁸⁶

In senior secretary's speech of 1868, the objective of *Mela* was reflected quite vividly: "our aim is to see that a self-reliant India comes into existence, that self-reliance becomes firmly rooted in the Indian

soil.”⁸⁷ From its very inception the success of *Mela* was evaluated in terms of its ability to unite ‘all classes of the community in one common bond.’⁸⁸ One of the ways the *Mela* sought to achieve the unity was by incorporating different sections and activities of the rural craftsman and the representatives of the lower orders of Bengali society. However, the *Mela* remained an isolated case of such endeavor because issues of rural upliftment and improvement of the condition of the lower orders in Bengal, though addressed, remained marginal compared to the concerns of the urban upper caste educated elites.⁸⁹ The *Mela*'s display of Bengali physical culture of Self-Help through various athletic activities and competition subsequently evolved into *Samiti* or *Akhara* culture of early twentieth century nationalist revolutionaries. Organizers of Hindu *Mela* were largely influenced by late nineteenth-century economic thought of budding anti-colonial thinkers. During this period, native enterprise was represented positively due to its aim of economic Self-Help. However, the lack of independent enterprise is an often repeated theme in the newspapers of the period. Despite having all the potentials for small and cottage industries in villages, Bengal lagged behind because of inadequate finance and improper market facility.⁹⁰ This entrepreneurially backward situation had often been criticized by the *Mela* organizers as well.⁹¹

However, the nation of the *Mela* organizers' mind had only social and cultural dimensions. It had no overt political connotation as they belonged to the generation of romantic nationalists.⁹² Rajnarain Basu's stress on the need for an all-round development of Hindu society, particularly that of their national character and national feeling was assimilative in nature. Therefore, the rejuvenated Hindu society, in their opinion, could not be unified on any exclusivist term. Rather this all-encompassing development could only be possible through incorporative toleration toward other prevailing elements of the society, namely, Muslims. However, the *Mela* organizers' complete orientation around Hindu society's traditions and symbols sometimes, seen as ideological germination point of Hindu communal nationalism. Interestingly, this incorporative nature of Hindu society, preached by them, subsequently was made a popular theme of discourse, namely, India's civilizational superiority by nationalists like Bipin Chandra Pal and Annie Besant. A universalist in approach, the poet Rabindranath Tagore adopted the same and further proposed an ever evolving hybrid national *Mahajati*.⁹³ This, in due time, infiltrated Gandhi's ideational

apparatus. In 1915, Gandhi extended the idea of a composite nationalism to include not only religious groups but castes and communities in general. It was in this assimilative power of Indian civilization that India could claim her difference from Europe, because here the idea of India developed more as an inclusive civilizational community, rather than as a political territorial states.⁹⁴ Thus, ultimately, by encouraging indigenous enterprises and manufacturing industries, by projecting a complete image of the motherland with her own distinctive culture, and by promoting the Bengali variant of physical culture, this *Mela* had created a *Swadeshi* spirit that was an invaluable legacy for the later generation.⁹⁵

2.5 *Swadeshi* Movement and the Second Emerging Moment of Self-Help in Bengal

The high point of Romantic nationalism was the *Swadeshi* movement triggered by the Partition of Bengal for a better administrative management, finalized by Viceroy Lord Curzon on 16th October, 1905.⁹⁶ Bhudev Mukhopadhyay first used the term *Swadesh* (one's own land) alongside *Swajati* (one's own people) in his *Samajik Prabandha*. Gopal Hari Deshmukh, a Maharashtrian reformer of 1870's first used the term *Swadeshi* (goods of one's own land). Instead of prayers and petition, this movement facilitated Self-Help and Constructive Work, emphasizing the need for work at the village level. Such efforts at self-reliance together with the support of vernacular mediums and utilization of traditional popular customs and institution (like *Mela* or fair) were felt to be the best method for drawing the masses into the national movement.⁹⁷ It was another emerging moment of Self-Help in Bengal, a movement that had been constantly rediscovering itself, evolving and expressing itself like an old wine in a new bottle. Following the late nineteenth-century trend of association between the idea of Self-Help and a culture of physical practice, this Constructive aspect of *Swadeshi* period had attracted many youths who later collaborated with revolutionary activities. There were revolutionary inner circles within many of these Constructive Work *Samitis*.⁹⁸ Even Barindra Kumar Ghosh's group of young revolutionaries was attracted for a brief while

by Rabindranath Tagore's scheme of constructing an ideal village community.⁹⁹ This phase of Self-Help through constructive rural level activities was genuinely kept aloof from political agitation by its ardent advocates. Thus, though a predecessor in spirit, it was different from the future Gandhian Constructive Work schemes as its towering figures very often attached themselves with conventional politics and nationalist agitations. The emphasis on self-reliance became identified with an appeal to traditional symbols and sentiment, as they came to be regarded as the most effective technique for bridging the gulf between the educated and the common people.¹⁰⁰ Once again, this method was later used to great effect by Gandhi in his Constructive Work propaganda.

In Tagore's journal *Bhandar*, themes related to cooperative solidarity, spirit of social service by youths and village as a decentralized unit of self-reliance, were regularly discussed.⁸³ In his seminal speech "*Swadeshi Samaj*"¹⁰¹ subsequently given at the Minerva and the Curzon theatre in 1904,¹⁰² this conceptual orientation received its ultimate portrayal. Here the traditional *Samaj* was hailed as the real centre of Indian community life and not the state which, by then, had been seen as the driving force of European spirit of centralization and violence. In his words, "villages must be organized to satisfy local needs with local efforts as association of villages should be an intermediate unit of organization (*Mandali*). If the heads of villages acting through this unit were able to organize all rural activities designed to satisfy local needs, self-government would become a reality in country as a whole. Training, financial and other forms of association and encouragement of local initiative would be essential for the establishment of schools, technical institutes, grain banks, and storage and supply cooperatives. Each *Mandali* should have its meeting place where people would assemble for recreation as well as for transacting such business arbitration of village disputes." While romanticizing the traditional village society, the task of urban educated middle class youths in this whole program was also preached: "...Let the volunteers go to the villages, spreading social and political enlightenment in the *Melas* through *Jatras* and magic lantern slides and lectures and above all, let us try to revive our traditional *Samaj*, channeling all constructive work through it once again." To Tagore, *Swadeshi* meant a society taking a different and lean stand against the external forces of state which in turn promoted self-reliance. "If we expect anything from the government, we will have to obtain

it at the expense of our freedom because if things to be done by the society are done by the government, society will eventually find itself in an inactive and functionless position. We had already deliberately tried to surrender all our social obligations in the hand of the state.” Later, Gandhi appeared on the scene and was able to synthesis what was vital, positive and Constructive in this form of Constructive *Swadeshi* and give it a moral orientation.

A fairly consistent and coherent set of reflections on an alternative socio-economic order represented by progressive rural communitarianism during the *Swadeshi* period found expression in Satish Chandra Mukherjee’s essay, “the Indian economic problem.”¹⁰³ Satish Chandra Mukherjee, editor of the journal, the Dawn, was the only nationalist intellectual of his generation to raise his voice vehemently against large-scale modern capitalist industry.¹⁰⁴ He argued for a decentralized system of industrial production on a wide rural base which would be pillared on a system of improved family handicrafts. Large scale urban capitalist industries were not totally out of place in his argument but they, in his opinion, should be limited to a few sectors owned and operated by the state. Grants and aids, both financial and technical, were welcomed by him for improvement of rural agriculture and handicrafts. For this purpose, he voiced ardently the need of a proper technical and industrial education curriculum, corroborating with nation’s socio-economic necessities. He genuinely advocated for a cooperative ethical life in a cooperative, structurally decentralized society, where material progress would be surpassed by spiritual and moral upliftment. Additional preservatives were later conjoined with this in Gandhian scheme of rural Constructive Work.¹⁰⁵

Village *Samitis* started mushrooming in this wave of *Swadeshi* and were particularly numerous in Barisal, Faridpur, Mymensingh and Tipper. Five most successful of Constructive Work *Samitis* were situated in these districts, namely, *Swadesh Bandhab Samiti*, *Brati Samiti*, *Dacca Anushilan Samiti*, *Subrid Samiti* and *Sadhana Samiti*. These districts of eastern Bengal became stronghold of Gandhians and their institutions during and after the Non-Cooperation movement. The towering figure of this variant of *Swadeshi*, who through his tireless effort made an all encompassing applicability of its ideals possible, was a schoolmaster of Barisal Brajomohan Vidyalaya, Aswinikumar Dutt. From the 1880’s, there had been a people’s association which provided the basis of Dutt’s work.¹⁰⁶ He organized the students of his school

into several volunteer bands on a permanent basis that eventually converted Barisal as real fortress of the movement. His *Swadesh Bandhab Samiti* with its 159 branches could penetrate deep into the interior of the district because of his organizing capabilities.¹⁰⁷ Volunteers of all these *Samitis* attended local *Melas* in large numbers mainly with the purpose of enforcing the boycott through various indigenous, traditional and vernacular mediums. *Swadeshi* sales through exhibitions and shops, which remained a prevalent feature of the movement, were later taken up by Gandhian workers of the province. Between 1906 and 1908, this was the only serious attempt made in Bengal to set up a relatively stable district organization with definite programs of regular work.¹⁰⁸ Permanent committees for promotion of *Swadeshi* industries and agriculture, national education and arbitration courts, cooperative banks, *Dharmagolas* and sanitation measure in the villages were parts of this definite blueprint.

This period witnessed introduction of many modern Western industries on the basis of indigenous capital, unlike Gandhian Constructive Work which aimed for the revival of authentic village industries. As has been discussed before, following the sentimental approach of late nineteenth-century economic thought, handlooms became a dominant theme of this newly emerging economic side of Self-Help. It was in *Hind Swaraj* that Gandhi first time mentions ancient and sacred handlooms. Many caste weavers, who had previously abandoned their family occupation, returned to it,¹⁰⁹ which in turn provided impetus to the local handloom industry in some old bases, namely, Burdwan, 24 Parganas, Nadia, Jessore. Thus during *Swadeshi* period, in particular, the handloom became the concrete, material symbol of an imagined simplicity and purity of rural life, of folklore, of a distinctive Indian tradition, and of forms of life regarded as outside the modern colonial rule.¹¹⁰ It has been suggested by Tapan Raychauduri that the contact with the West and the colonial experience itself acted as a catalyst for our culture, giving rise to industries different from both the indigenous inheritance and the elements of Western civilization.¹¹¹ Following this argument, it can be said that the goods produced and promoted during the *Swadeshi* campaign were, thus, neither the products of India's artisanal past, nor the products of the British colonial economy. Rather they were new products of that particular wave. The products of *Swadeshi* movement bore the traditional legacy of a legitimizing inventory modern procedure.

The period of *Swadeshi*, with this claim of legitimate antiquity, also witnessed the rise of a major concern for the status of the Indian craftsman. It was believed that the crafts in India could ultimately be revived to sustain the ideals of beauty and love and to serve the highest aims of religion and life, thereby connecting the project of artisanal rehabilitation to a high spiritual and ethical realm.¹¹² The product of artisan's labor was seen as the 'art of the masses' and as the foundation of good living of a truly civilized life by leading art critic and art reformer E. B. Havell. Ananda Coomaraswamy in his 1909 book *Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* was thoroughly preoccupied with this theme.¹¹³ Finally in this conceptual evolution, the ultimate point of culmination came with Gandhi's powerful appropriation of the whole craftsman semiotic.

However, surprisingly, the nationalist demands of the *Swadeshi* period had been increasingly focused on the necessity of the state patronage towards indigenous enterprise. In order to combat the hegemony of the British capital, the nationalists proposed the protection of indigenous capital. Suresh Chandra Banerjee through his Bengal legislative council speeches and demands became a strong advocate of this.¹¹⁴ Therefore, despite Gandhi's later conceptually radical reformulation, *Swadeshi* remained a movement for the nationalization of capital, not its abolition.¹¹⁵ Amit Bhattacharya, in his work on *Swadeshi* enterprises of Bengal, has also addressed this. In fact, his point of departure formulates a critique because he says that only two things remained *Swadeshi* in this whole entrepreneurial endeavor; capital and members of the Board of Directors. Machineries and raw materials were very often imported.¹¹⁶ Finally, the trend of Constructive *Swadeshi* seldom went beyond the boundaries of *bhadralok* movement. Change was more apparent than real as their attitude towards the Bengal's rural population showed a good deal of ambiguousness. This bewilderment was highly reflected in limitations of *Swadeshi* movement's agrarian programs.¹¹⁷ These hindrances not only widened the gap instead of bridging it in many instances, but were also later inherited by Gandhian Constructive Workers in Bengal as well.

2.6 Conclusion

The theoretical and practical apparatus for the future Gandhian Constructive Work organizations in Bengal was thus the germination of seeds planted in late nineteenth and early twentieth century's romantic nationalism and its applied practices, namely, endeavors of Hindu *Mela* and *Swadeshi* movement. Therefore, in many instances, his followers in Bengal assimilated his philosophy of moral action with existing precursors. This generated end results with new ideological bases, where Bengali traditions and practices received an upper hand most of the time. While implementing these ideas and methods in practice, the Gandhian Constructive Workers not only avoided concepts obsolete for their provincial context, but also evaluated and eventually modulated many of these methods to fit in their current needs. Nonetheless, they inherited these legacies along with their successes and failures which prevailed quite amply in their implicational contexts as well. The other chapters will generously attempt to show this assimilative fuzziness in theory and practice of Gandhian Constructive Workers in Bengal's provincial context of 1920's and 1930's.

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Chapter 3

Gandhi's Philosophy & Method: Revolutionary & Organizational Output of *Swadeshi*, *Swaraj* & Constructive Work

Gandhi never encouraged establishing a sect around his name or methods.¹ But despite his utter disgust, subsequently a group of followers, distinct from hitherto existing political workers gathered themselves around his ideologies. Their philosophy of action, moral-spiritual-political continuum method of nation building, uses of the new ideational strategies like *Satyagraha*, revival and reform of traditional Indian virtues of Non-Violence and Truth in modern contextualities led to the development of this distinct identity. His unique style of producing radically new alternatives at every step, in both philosophical and practical spheres, not only decreased his approachability as a mass leader but also generated a homogenizing echelon in this national regeneration process for the first time. A peep inside philosophy and practice of his Constructive Work makes this point more clear as it gives an ideological salvation of Self-Help for both rich and poor. A close reading of Gandhi's three important tracts regarding the topic, namely, 'Constructive Program: Its Meaning and Place',² '*Asbaram* Observances in Action',³ and 'From Yurveda *Mandir*',⁴ gives clarity to the true virtues of Gandhian Constructive Workers: Truth, *Abimsa*, Charity, Love, Non-stealing, Non-Possession, Control of Palate, Fearlessness, Vows of Tolerance, Dignity of Manual Labor, Sacrifice and Prayer. It deserves to be briefly mentioned that Gandhi is neither the first nor the only thinker

to relate such virtues to political action. Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, to mention a few philosophers from the most obvious tradition, prescribed the qualities of wisdom, prudence, justice etc. as appropriate to political action. Machiavelli, a leader of the opposite tradition, was equally aware of the importance of the moral will to effective action, to the achievement of *Verita Effettuale*. Although his virtue in content is nothing but a substitute for the virtues of the classical and medieval writers.⁵

This chapter first projects his general philosophical methods which constituted the basis for all his creations, from a band of professional *Satyagrahis* to his ultimate utopian goal for *Swaraj*. The intermediate porous layers of his ideational apparatus for the above mentioned aspects are generously fulfilled by *Swadeshi* and Constructive Work. The implicational ground for this philosophy of action facilitates many national level schemes and organizations. Thereafter, this chapter describes a few nation building institutionalized resolutions and adjuncts, namely, Basic National Education Scheme, All India *Khaddar* Board, Gandhi *Seva Sangh*, AISA, and AIVIA, that were the vehicle of the multidimensional Gandhian Constructive Work program. We will link these multi-directional Constructive Work threads in the provinces (mainly Bengal) into one converging national point from where in the next chapter, we will see how the fountain of this philosophical action received its *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi* in Bengal.

3.1 Philosophy and Method of Gandhi's *Satyagraha* Politics

Gandhi's most important contribution to political modernization of India was to help Congress become a mass political organization, manned by full-time political workers and capable of mobilizing public opinion.⁶ Structurally, the core of this democratization of Congress lay in the proliferation of units capable of attracting and channeling a mass membership base through the Subjects Committee, Annual Sessions, Provincial Congress Committees (PCCs) and District Congress Committees (DCCs). However, this transformation was equally assisted by his Constructive Work program and organizations related to that, namely, AISA, AIVIA and their provincial auxiliaries. It was hoped that these penetrative inroads would work towards the eradication of communalism and social evils like untouchability.⁷ Therefore, the

Congress of Gandhi's dream was an intermediate echelon for adjusting everyone into one entity, what would eventually represent the India of Gandhi's dream. In its specific historical contextuality, his political philosophy provided, for the first time in modern Indian politics, an ideological basis for including everyone into this political nation.⁸ This generated an umbrella of 'incorporative nationalism'⁹ which became recognized as his exceptional style of inclusion where everyone could find something to identify with.¹⁰

He reached his audiences through the use of two separate registers of communication and persuasion. On one hand, Gandhi wrote a great deal, for the middle class medium of politics was language in all its wordiness. On the other, Gandhi himself as an individual politician resorted used other elements in the complex and wide semiotic register available in rural India.¹¹ This included the symbolism of a whole range of non-discursive and non-modern ways of making meaning. Thus, by introducing *Satyagraha* and reinventing the *Ashtam*, by creating social service organizations, by his mastery of signs and symbols, by making clothing matter (namely *Khadi*)¹² and by his command of political theatre, Gandhi was able to reach beyond the literate, often English-speaking middle class elites of urban India to the non-literate millions living in India's villages and towns.¹³ Therefore, Gandhi's kind of discourse was of inexhaustible originality and it managed to bridge the gulf between the two sides and keep the values, objectives, and conceptions of these two worlds mutually intelligible.¹⁴

The study of Gandhian symbols suggests that when politics attempts to renovate an ancient and well-established society like the Hindu society, it can best do so by stressing its continuity with the past. Gandhi utilized symbols of tradition to inculcate aspects of modern values as disciplined labor and national empathy. There are echoes of similar ideas in the Machiavellian theory that a political reformer must, to the greatest extent possible, preserve appearances of the past. Symbols become relevant only in the relevant historical and cultural setting. It was for this reason that, Gandhi selected some particular symbols rather than others for a modern political context to give an aura of traditional continuity, of history and culture.¹⁵ If we take up *Khadi* as an example, the traditional values that are resonated by its symbolic appearance are economic regeneration, mastery over machinery, empathy between the rich and the poor,

Swaraj or socio-economic and political regeneration, *Sarvodaya* or the doctrine of welfare of all. Poverty, truth and fortitude are three congruent virtues that are reflected by this symbol. Another relevant example in this context is his symbolic use of Cow. Purity, preservation of the Hindu identity, identity and sanctity of all forms of life, Hindu-Muslim unity, religious tolerance, national unity and *Sarvodaya* are some of the values that are primarily attached to this symbol. Additional reflection of a set of congruent virtues like chastity, truth, fortitude also spearheaded its symbolic approachability.¹⁶

Gandhi's *Swadeshi* tours and exhibitions brought into being and mapped a new cultural and political geography of a homogenized nation by connecting communities within it. Demonstration, hawking parties, use of lantern slides, exhibition and sell of *Khadi* and other cottage industries' products thus created a newly emerging idea of national Self-Help in the visible public sphere, hitherto dominated by colonial masters.¹⁷ Nonetheless, Gandhi's political theatre was creating a new and distinctive form of the public sphere and public view through negotiating the adjustment of private differences because for him private sphere was the location of India's deepest inequalities. It was marked by the simplest visible practice Self-Help, simple living, the performance of manual labor and polluting tasks, making and wearing *Khadi*, living with and learning from comrades of diverse backgrounds. These performances were to demonstrate the ascetic discipline required for *Swaraj*, *Sarvodaya* and the pursuit of situational truth.¹⁸

There happened to be a general consensus among the urban educated middle class that rural people lacked the basic awareness of their own good.¹⁹ This went along with Gandhi's definition of an ideal *Satyagrahi*. Gandhi's philosophy of *Satyagraha* or truth force was the concluding point of his Truth–Non-Violence moral continuum. His method of *Satyagraha*, looked very much like the passive resistance of the extremists, but his insistence on Non-Violence alleviated the fears of the moderates and other propertied classes, who were apprehensive of agitational politics. It facilitated a cementing process for all porous backdrops in modern Indian nationalist movement. The concept of *Satyagraha* in its application to politics appeared through him as an intense political activity by large masses of people. But it had never been so much about resistance as about the modalities of resistance, about organizational principles, rules of conduct, strategies and tactics.²⁰ It was a legitimate, moral and truthful form of political action by the people

against the injustices of the state, an active mass resistance to unjust rule.²¹ Thus this concept had always demanded a high moral value of trained spirituality and could only be executed in contextual implications by few such ascetic activists. Decisions along Gandhian ideological lines were expected to be taken only by few true *Satyagrahis*. This hints upon the fact that the practice of Gandhi's mass political action was not conditional upon the masses themselves understanding its principles or their full implications.²² Therefore, before restarting Civil Disobedience on a mass scale, it seemed necessary to him, to create a band of well-trying, pure-hearted volunteers who thoroughly understood the strict conditions of his *Satyagraha*.²³ He expected that the *Satyagrahi* would be honest to their deepest convictions and ready to suffer on behalf of their commitments.²⁴ The tasks of a *Satyagrahi*, both political and Constructive, were described by him as following: obeying proper rules of conduct, maintaining relations with the political leadership as well as with the masses, questioning about the structure of decision-making, following lines of command of upper leadership, propagating Gandhian political strategies and tactics, inquiring the practical issues for mass interest, breaking as well as obeying the laws of the state. Thus it appears to be much a science of political struggle, indeed as much a military science of violence, only it is superior because it is a science not of arms but of the moral force of the soul.²⁵

Gandhi himself stressed the similarities between the preliminary training of an army and of his volunteers, namely, band of Non-Violent *Satyagrahis*.²⁶ The *Khadi* campaign, for example, was likened to a form of mass discipline and training process. Constructive Work was to a *Satyagrahi*, according to him, what arms were to a violent man. His variant of Constructive Work combined notions of conventional military organization and discipline with principles of spiritual discipline adapted from Indian religious traditions.²⁷ A user of *Charkha* was often described on exactly similar lines to those of a *Satyagrahi*; development of self-sufficiency, self-reliance, self-respect, self-help, foresight, sense of economic security and cooperation.²⁸

Like the Gandhian creed of Non-Violent army of *Satyagrahis* and Constructive Workers, the work of Rural Reconstruction by country's youths was also perceived sometimes as an ascetic military service since it also contributed in nation-building process.²⁹ This can be further claimed by citing an interest-

ing anecdote. When a young boy in Bengal was arrested and taken to the police station for interrogation under charges of hawking and selling *Khaddar*, he replied while asked about charkha, "have you seen our machine gun?"³⁰ Bengal subsequently became a hub of trained professional *Satyagrahis* through provincial level Constructive organizations. The philosophy of action of late nineteenth century anti-colonial thinkers, the overt connection between religion and nation-building process and most importantly the legacies of Hindu *Mela* and *Swadeshi* movement worked as a torchbearer during Gandhi's phase of subsequent nationalist movements. The spiritual and philosophical virtue of action are amply evident among Bengal's Constructive Workers and their organizations. Stalwarts among them, Satish Chandra Dasgupta once wrote, "we are apt to compare *Khadi* work to a military program."³¹ These virtues of disciplinary prudence, fearlessness, fortitude among Bengal's Constructive Workers and Non-Cooperators will be discussed in a detail in the next chapter.

3.2 Gandhi's *Swaraj*

Gandhi's goal of *Swaraj* was a moral goal of spirit force, and therefore, an unattainable utopia of unparalleled subtlety. Gandhi was convinced that key to *Swaraj* was not in the cities but in the villages.³² After closing of Sabarmati *Asbram* in 1933 and his retirement from politics in 1934, he started personally sharing village life with the villagers. He hoped to refine a method by which the villagers themselves would gradually become their own community workers. This method was associated with Gandhi's concept of self-help. This asserts that the state, no matter how well intentioned, cannot, on its own, lift the poor out of poverty unless the poor, on their own, are willing to get out of it.³³

Gandhi believed that a true *Satyagrahi* would always choose true Non-Violent *Swaraj*, which would only happen by pursuing the program of Constructive Work. The parliamentary program could, at best, bring political *Swaraj* which was not true *Swaraj* to him.³⁴ W. W. Pearson while commenting on this partial *Swaraj*, namely constitutional *Swaraj*, made a comparison between Indian and Irish political subjugation and praised the rejection of all-round parliamentary politics in the nationalist movements of both

these countries. The Irish Agricultural Organization Society (IAOS), although officially apolitical, became associated with the Irish Home Rule movement and Irish nationalist activity from the early 20th century. The founders of IAOS were motivated by a desire to “regenerate” Irish farmers materially and morally. Together, these people captured the spirit of change as they became part of a wider project of cultural nationalism that responded to Irish economic problems.³⁵ For Pearson, political approach is useless to a community, living on the verge of starvation. A true *Swaraj* is not only constituted of economic independence along with political one but is also a lesson in itself of self-mastery.³⁶ Modern civilization precludes the possibility of an all-around *Swaraj*, by shifting the locus of human endeavor to objects of bodily welfare. The capacity to rule oneself is different from Home Rule or political freedom of constitution political process.³⁷ The inner self-purification therefore provides a balanced *Swaraj* of self and body alongside socio-economic and political *Swaraj* of the nation.³⁸

Therefore, following this line of ideology, as late as November 1945, Gandhi instructed members of the All India Spinners' Association, the central body of *Khadi* workers not to take part in elections or any other political activity of that sort.³⁹ Even while conceding during 1946 that many Congressmen must now enter the business of running the state machinery, Gandhi still desired to see them largely in oppositional roles. The only positive role he could envisage for the national government was the support it might provide for his illustrative Constructive program.⁴⁰ However, while identifying a specific role for the state in the program of national construction, Gandhi was not abandoning his fundamental belief that the state could never be the appropriate machinery for carrying out this task. His suggestion was that the nation state should use its authority to abdicate its presumed responsibility of propagating development and therefore clear the ground for popular non-state agencies to take up the work of revitalizing the village socio-economic life.⁴¹ Thus, the Gandhian conception of state was that of a minimal state. However, this minimal state was in a fundamentally different sense from *laissez-faire* liberalism which questioned the need of the modern state altogether.⁴² What Gandhi sought was not a minimal version of the modern state, but the state minimized in a pre-modern way.⁴³

The constant refrain in his speeches was that *Swaraj* and *Swadeshi* had to go together.⁴⁴ *Swadeshi*, he

declared, “is the biggest, the safest, and the surest part” of the Non-Cooperation agenda in its constructive form.⁴⁵ The relationship between Gandhi’s *Swadeshi* and *Swaraj*, between freedom and the creation of a Non-Violent social order become more clear when we read a small tract ‘Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place.’⁴⁶ This was Gandhi’s manifesto of Constructive Work which provided the visionary basis for his national and provincial organizations. His all-encompassing and exhaustive Constructive program identified eighteen areas of Indian society where the Non-State organizations and the state could work together. This includes themes like improvement of communal relations, eradication of untouchability, improvement of position of women, improvement of socio-economic condition of aboriginal tribes, propaganda work and lessons on rural sanitation, revival and reform of traditional cottage industries including *Khadi*, spread of adult education and Basic National Education Scheme.⁴⁷ The practical implicational credibility of such an exhaustive work list is Civil Disobedience. Creation of any difference between the two according to him is, “mere bravado and worse than useless”, or like “a paralyzed hand attempting to lift a spoon.”⁴⁸ Therefore, when Civil Disobedience movement broke out, political participation and subsequent imprisonment of purely Constructive Workers or ideological followers were highest. Constructive Workers and Gandhi’s followers in Bengal were no exceptions. Gandhi never relied on mainstream political bodies for his Constructive program and from time to time, besides rearticulating his own philosophy behind the scheme, he proposed or introduced new policies and organizational bodies. The rest of the chapter is a generous attempt to discuss few of his renowned and national level Constructive Work schemes and organizations. Like his decentralized penetrative methods of political homogenization, all of these Constructive Work schemes very effectively linked themselves with provincial level auxiliaries and Bengal, having a resonating legacy in both National Education and Constructive *Swadeshi*, topped their priority list.

3.3 Basic National Education Scheme (1937): Gandhi's Response to Nation's Unemployment Question

Colonial rulers understood that because their authority could not be legitimized in terms of the constituted common sense of traditional Indian society, the proper course of action was to try to reconstitute this common sense. Naturally, the question of education, the instrumentality through which the common sense of a society is created, was of such central concern to colonial authority.⁴⁹ The more the British cultural policy was successful in transforming the conceptual alphabet of this group, the further it got removed from its collective self, which was linked with traditional India's social community.⁵⁰ The secularization of education, for instance, has made a fetish of the knowledge of letters and has thereby both exaggerated and rationalized the inequalities in society.⁵¹ This resulted in creation of 'the underlings' of the colonial authority, namely, three presidencies' educated elites who were marginally, if at all, interested in any far-reaching economic and social change in India's rural socio-economic life.⁵²

The first challenge against this colonial system of education was staged during Bengal's *Swadeshi* movement period. It ultimately failed not because of its unattractive job opportunities only, but also because it followed the same colonial curriculum and syllabus under the banner of an indigenous alternative, namely, *Swadeshi*.⁵³ This scheme was in no fundamental way different from the colonial education system and addressed this precarious gap between two sections of Indian society very ambivalently. This wake for a national education system faded away soon after the movement was over. Scattered and sporadic efforts were still visible but they all failed to address the question of this widening gap.⁵⁴ Gandhi in his response to this introduced a proposal in 1937, the resolution of Basic National Education which was later summed up quite emphatically in the exhaustive Zakir Hussain Report of 1938.⁵⁵ The worsening situation of unemployment among nation's educated young generation was also addressed by him in this proposal by providing an alternative indigenous possibility. It was thought that the scheme would work as an ideal bridge between the educated urban middle class youths and illiterate village folks. Educational infrastructure had been hitherto financed by taxation from liquor sales. Under Gandhi's *Swaraj* scheme, the resources

for Basic National Education would come from neither liquor nor land but from the spinning wheel and other cottage industries.⁵⁶

In the past, some proposals for employment through social services had been brought forth by intellectuals. Government's financial and organizational intervention was also welcomed for furthering the remedies pertaining to this increasing unemployment issue.⁵⁷ Most importantly, before Gandhi's Basic National Education resolution of 1937, this growing unemployment issue had already been addressed by the Government of India. On December 1935, an advisory board of education was appointed for this consisting of both native and British representatives. A meeting was held by this board, in which secondary school level vocational education through admission in technical training and vocational education institutions had been discussed and supported by majority. In this meeting the poor Research and Development sector of indigenous industries was also highlighted. Therefore, a proposal of associating them with various technical institutions for better research and innovation was initiated. Native financiers were asked to join this whole reform process through their proposal.⁵⁸ This once again hints upon India's growing instability in case of youth employment issue during 1920's and 1930's. This precarious situation of youth unemployment was seen both by the government and by some of the native intellectuals as the troubling cause of the growing revolutionary and Communist activities.

Provincial level Constructive Workers tried their best, through both the Basic National Education Scheme and the newly emergent exhaustive Constructive program to address this difficult situation. And as Bengal already had a previous altar for national education, Constructive Workers of this province utilized this educational policy to the fullest. Suggestions for new curriculum following Basic National Education line, establishment of new technical and vocational training institutions and introduction of *Khadi* and other cottage industries as alternative to lucrative government services in general became aspects of their effort. AISA, AIVIA and its auxiliary organizations in Bengal were praised by provincial leaders and thinkers for their successful drive in eradication of youth unemployment.⁵⁹

3.4 All India *Khaddar* Board

The AISA was preceded by other efforts to organize the *Khadi* network. In July, 1921, for the first time, a Congress resolution asked for information on *Khadi* work. In May 1922, a department of *Khadi* was sanctioned by the Congress working committee under the management of Jamnalal Bajaj. The department of technical instruction was located at the *Satyagraha Ashram* and was under the supervision of Maganlal Gandhi. The inter-provincial work was coordinated by the department of production under the stewardship of Lakshmidas Puroshottam. It had a number of travel inspectors to facilitate its work. The sales department under the Vithaldas Jerajani opened *Khadi* stores in places where Provincial Congress Committees of different provinces could not.⁶⁰

Having recognized the popular appeal of Non-Cooperation and *Khadi*, the Congress Working Committee created the All India *Khaddar* Board in 1921, allowing the organization to manage and benefit directly from ongoing movement. The sustained financial commitment to the *Swadeshi* program transformed the movement's scope. Thus, the program of spinning, familiar to the residents of the *Satyagraha Ashram*, was now pursued on a national scale. The Board comprised three distinct but interrelated divisions: technical instruction, production, and sales. Each division played a particular role in the popularization of *Khadi* goods, and the Congress Working Committee approved separate budgets for each.⁶¹ A *Khaddar* Board meeting in January 1924 made clear that the Board in particular, and the Congress more generally, had accepted Gandhi's belief that production should be organized at the local level. It was important to *Swadeshi* proponents that production not be overly centralized, in contrast to systems of modern industrial production. In 1922, a new school to train *Khadi* workers, called the *Akhila Khadi Vidyalaya*, started its first batch at the *Ashram*.⁶² Maganlal Gandhi became the backbone of this institution. Graduates of *Vidyalaya* dispersed to teach their skills in the regions the *Khaddar* Board had approved for investment. However *Khadi* workers were also deployed in rural areas in times of natural calamity. Through this, not only did these proponents hope to aid those in need, they viewed these catastrophes as opportunities to return village communities to their self-sufficient state.⁶³ These efforts were aimed at

bridging the tremendous gap between India's poor agricultural classes and the urban middle-classes. Under such circumstances, *Khadi* workers were able to introduce *Khadi* and the other indigenous products of the movement into rural communities.

3.5 All-India Spinners' Association (AISA)

The AISA was established in September 1925 at Patna by a resolution of the All India Congress Committee (AICC).⁶⁴ It was headquartered at Gandhi's Sabarmati *Ashram*. It was established to be an organization unaffected and uncontrolled by politics, by political changes or political bodies. Though a Congress-sponsored organization, it had an independent existence with its own constitution and was autonomous.⁶⁵ The year 1925 was Gandhi's year of the Congress presidency. AISA's formation vividly foretold the beginning of end of his political influence which started taking roots in Bardoli resolution of 1922. In the beginning of its career, AISA's Council had equal representation from both political as well as Constructive Work streams of the National Congress. AISA's Council meeting was held with religious regularity and even the political upheavals rarely intervened to obstruct its frequency. In December 1928, after Maganlal Gandhi's untimely demise, AISA's reconstituted Council comprised 12 members. If members such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Rajendra Prasad, and Rajagopalachari could be said to belong to the political stream, there were Jannalal Bajaj, Gangadhar Deshpande, Satish Chandra Dasgupta, Shankerlal Banker, Manilal Kothari, and Konda Venkatappayya who were diehard Constructive Workers and fairly apolitical. AISA's executive positions always remained safely in the hands of Gandhi's Constructive workers. Yet, it would be erroneous to assume that there was absence of friction between the two groups.⁶⁶ There are recorded instances of ruffled egos between Nehru and Kumarappa, the executive President of Gandhi's other outfit, AIVIA.⁶⁷ However, as freedom's dateline neared, the political participation in the Council fell.

AISA members' prime duty was to campaign for hand-spinning and *Khadi*. A member was expected to socialize and invite people to adopt *Khadi*, spin regularly, and enroll new members. If necessary, a mem-

ber was also expected to hawk *Khadi*. The individual AISA member was expected to adhere scrupulously to a spinning routine and habitually wear *Khadi*.⁶⁸ In its second Trustee Meet, held on 11th November 1925, at Sabarmati *Ashram*, a sub-committee was appointed to frame rules and instructions for organizing work in the provinces, for the encouragement of voluntary spinning, and for enlistment of members. In its formative years, the majority of council deliberations apparently were on the applications for the establishment of Sale and Production units that came from all over the country. The organization's provincial presence was made possible through the agents appointed by its Council. Provincial agents and secretaries were significant in the spread of the AISA network. The moment provincial governments came under the Congress the AISA implored them to buy its products indiscriminately. It asked the provincial governments to adopt legislative and administrative measures to support *Khadi*. Gandhi wanted the provincial governments to regard the AISA and the other sister organizations as their own expert, voluntary agencies. Gandhi added that in other countries, governments see that the goods produced under its supervision are given first preference in the market.⁶⁹

The association significantly widened its funding sources besides financial contributions from wealthy philanthropists. AISA mainly sought support from the Congress. This support continued but in a reduced manner after 1925. *Khadi* and other Constructive Work of both AISA and future AIVIA drew resources from the Tilak *Swaraj* Funds (1920) and C. R. Das Funds (1925).⁷⁰ The association reversed the *Khaddar* Board's funding policies, placing resources in its own institutions, rather than subsidizing private business interests and independent entrepreneurs. This centralization allowed the association greater control over the distribution centers it had taken over from the board. Thus while it professed to be a philanthropic enterprise facilitating decentralized networks, it was run like any other commercial organization. In addition to this, by undertaking rural tours and exhibitions, the association sought funding for local efforts. However investing money was no hindrance, rather finding suitable men was always a challenge.⁷¹ AISA did not make any special effort to enroll members and thus its membership-roll remained insubstantial. Even those who had joined in the first flush of enthusiasm withdrew soon afterwards. The limited membership somehow restricted the organization's desire to adopt a democratic administration.⁷² In recognition of its

difficulties in recruiting suitable workers and enrolling qualified voluntary members, AISA council in its 8th meeting, held in December 1926, resolved to establish a *Khadi* Service. It was also called *Khadi Seva Sangh* and was instituted as AISA's answer to government bureaucracy. It was the beginning of building a dedicated cadre in the service of *Khadi*.⁷³ An elaborate recruiting and training process was laid down for the potential recruits. The tutoring was for minimum of two years in AISA's *Khadi Vidyalaya* at Sabarmati. Upon receiving a certificate of competency the candidate was sent to a provincial *Khadi Karyalaya* to gain practical experience for a month. Recruitment was done after signing a contract that bound a candidate to at least three years of uninterrupted service to the AISA. The head of the province could terminate the services of a candidate upon furnishing a satisfactory cause. The Council of the AISA was made the final appellate authority for redress of any grievances. Gandhi advised not to adopt the business strategies of mainstream commercialism and recruited candidates only if they proved an imbued spirit while placing salary on a secondary position. However, AISA primarily focused on salaried professional workforce, which again hints upon its business enterprise like organizational character. A candidate was to receive a monthly remuneration of thirty rupees, which was raised to a maximum of fifty in a period of three years.⁷⁴

The AISA opened sales' outlets all over the country. These stores were given a common name of *Khadi Bhandar* or *Khadi Vastralaya*. In 1927, there were 110 retail outlets owned, certified and affiliated to the AISA. In 1929, the list increased to 328 productions-cum-sales depots scattered all over the country. In 1940, number of *Khadi* Bhandar shops in principle cities reached 3000. But these had always an uneven spread. Bengal had the highest number at 66 shops, mostly due to the efforts of the *Khadi Pratishthan* and the *Abhay Ashram*⁷⁵ which will be discussed in a great deal in the next chapter. The association sponsored competitions for inventors, encouraging the public to design a more efficient, less expensive spinning wheel.⁷⁶ Following Gandhi's dictated Non-violent line of action for a strictly disciplined *Satyagrahi*,⁷⁷ AISA workforce had a male upper-caste bias⁷⁷ that was not an exception in other Gandhian institutions as well. Gandhi's *Khadi* work made the homogenization possible for appearance on a national scale irrespective of class, caste, religion and region. Thus, with the development of hand spinning and the production of *Khadi* in the Sabarmati *Ashram*, Gandhi was poised to pursue India's regeneration in his own distinct

way.⁷⁸ Exhibitional displays including signs, maps, or charts, were generally provided by the main office of the Spinners' Association in Ahmedabad. It was conceived that the organizers of *Khadi* exhibitions across the country, regardless of their specific location or their particular affiliation, should convey a consistent message.

Transparency was a visible aspect to its endeavor. Since its foundation in 192,⁵ the AISA published its annual report containing detailed analysis of the income and expenditure of the Association and its associate agencies.⁷⁹ AISA conducted a census of all its workers.⁸⁰ In 1929, it began a provident fund scheme for its workers. Because of the high cost in recruiting educated workers, AISA in its later phase put greater emphasis on the recruitment of workers from a rural background. Gandhi considered formation of any union within AISA's productive units as 'fallacy' and a central body was suggested instead for grievance redressal purposes.⁸¹ AISA launched a detailed data collection drive too. The systematic survey of work was possible due to the voluntary discipline the AISA demanded from its subordinate organizations.⁸² To keep in regular touch with customers, AISA proposed that each centre maintain a register of customers with their full names and addresses.⁸³ Every production centre was instructed to maintain a spinners' register giving the names and address of the spinners with information about quantity of yarn and wages earned by each spinner. They were asked to provide information on and samples of its produced cloth. These particulars were used by the technical department to make generalizations, draw deductions and guide *Khadi* producers.

Thus, the AISA had stiffened into an establishment. It had become a worker driven organization that served the city based consumers by paying starvation wages to producers inhabiting in low opportunity areas. In February, 1934, Gandhi wrote a letter to Vithaldas Jejarani suggesting reorienting the course of the *Khadi* organization. He was told that focus of spreading *Khadi* must now shift from cities to villages.⁸⁴ In October, 1934, the AISA and its Wardha sitting, resolved to raise the spinners' wage to give clothing (20 yards annually) and maintenance in accordance with a scientifically prescribed scale of minimum food requirement. Distribution was to be confined to the province where it was manufactured. *Khadi* producers were made entitled to market their produce only after they had taken what they needed for personal use.⁸⁵

3.6 Gandhi Seva Sangh

In the immediate aftermath of Gandhi's withdrawal from the Congress in 1934 due to suspension of Civil Disobedience alongside Gandhi's personal guilt of failure and philosophical bankruptcy, a new organization received his and his colleagues' attention. It was in July 1923, while Gandhi was in prison, that the Gandhi *Seva Sangh* (GSS or the *Sangh* from here on) was founded. The founding members of the *Sangh* were loyal political colleagues Gandhi who had faithfully fought within the Congress to keep afloat his agenda of Constructive Work as the basis of freedom. The *Sangh* identified itself with the vision of national struggle through constructive work, and was registered as a charitable institution in 1927 with headquarters at the Gandhi *Asbaram* of C. Goopalachari at Trichengadu. Gandhi's closest non-political associates reactivated the moribund organization in 1934 and transferred the headquarters to Wardha. Gandhi took this opportunity to recognize and reconstitute the *Sangh*. Jammalal Bajaj played a significant role in transforming Wardha into a laboratory for the village reconstruction experiment. The *Sangh's* revised constitution declared the service of the people in accordance with the principles of *Satyagraha* as its main objective. Being a predecessor of AIVIA, its functions were quite similar to that of AIVIA. Revival of hand spinning and weaving, service to the villagers by revival of village trade and industry, moral and physical improvement of the villagers, spread of Basic National Education scheme, propaganda for a national language (Hindi), removal of evils of liquor and other intoxicants, service to the oppressed castes and backward classes, establishment of inter-communal unity, improvement of the position of women, medical relief and nursing, improved cattle rearing and publication of Gandhian literature - all these were given primary importance since its inception. The *Sangh*, in the process of national homogenization, created *Hindusthani Talimi Sangh* to propagate Hindi as a nationwide recognized language. It was believed that to show India as the one unified nation, India must claim a *lingua franca* like its western counterparts. It deserves to be mentioned that during the romantic nationalism period of late nineteenth century, Bengali anti-colonial intellectuals like Rajnarain Basu and Bhudev Mukhopadhyay also prioritized Hindi as a unifying language of communication in this ancient land of diversity. However, during the moderate

phase of Indian National Congress, English was given an upper hand by political mendicants. The *Sangh*, since its reconstitution in 1934, had been quite well-organized with its patrons, associate members and full-time workers. The monthly magazine, *Sarvodaya*, acted as its mouthpiece for propaganda. The Central Provinces became the primary target of their provincial activities. By 1939, its membership increased to 144 full time members, 45 associate members in addition to 20 wealthy philanthropist patrons.⁸⁶

At its 2nd annual meeting held in early 1936, the *Sangh* decided to hold all its sessions in villages. The *Sangh* members in the 3rd conference at Hudli, 1937 were given permission to participate in parliamentary politics which was elaborately extended at the fourth conference in Delang, Orissa, 1938. Thus in 1937, the *Sangh's* participation in the election was announced with Gandhi's limited consent. The *Sangh* members were permitted, with approval from the Congress Working Committee, to participate in election to the legislative assembly. Participation of the *Sangh* members as candidates and campaigners in the election process helped Congress emerge victorious. This gradual move towards mainstream politics was detested by some of the *Sangh's* idealist members like president Kishorilal Mushruwala, who at one point asked permission for his resignation.⁸⁷ The *Sangh* members' active political participation was justified by Vallabhbhai Patel, a *Seva Sangh* executive member belonged to conventional politics. It was believed that the *Sangh* members' direct influence in the political decision-making process was needed to save Congress from further disintegration. By the time, new reactionary elements, namely socialism, according Patel, were mushrooming under the benevolent aegis of Congress.⁸⁸ In order to check their counter strikes and to rescue Congress's national level achievements from their hands, a better assimilative wing for both Constructive and political workers was needed. Rejuvenation of the *Sangh* in 1934 had made that point clear. During the eve of the formation of Forward Block, Subhash Chandra Bose's claim of its work objective of providing a left alternative against the *Sangh's* right wing policies within the Congress vivified this motive. Gandhi was not in any cordial terms with the socialists either. Congress's right-wing politicians and vehement Gandhi followers had never been on a pleasant terms with socialists. This drift happened due to Gandhi as he believed that the inevitable regulatory control of state socialism diminishes the autonomy of individuals. Socialists and capitalists, in his opinion, are drinking from the same fountain of progress,

hoping to use technology and management to promote economic growth. Therefore, each is confusing ends and means.⁸⁹ Moreover, a violent upsurge in the name of class struggle will disrupt the existing reality of India's harmonious community life irrespective of caste or other differentiating pre-modern categories. A parallel can be drawn with Liang Shumming's critical assessment of China's rural communist struggle in 1930's. He was a stalwart of Chinese Rural Reconstruction, an apolitical movement for rural uplift with a legitimate claim of maintaining equal distance from both ongoing Communist class struggle and nationalist government of China. He preferred to leave existing social hierarchies intact as he believed that China's villages had no class contradictions, only social differences based on wealth and occupation. A violent revolution would be harmful, because it would disrupt the surviving remains of the original social structure and marginalize the most resourceful villagers.⁹⁰ Gandhi's comments pertaining to the socialists were almost immediately countered. They vehemently stated that, while Gandhi appears to stand for the interests of the masses, he is in fact an agent of the bourgeoisie, always serving their interests when it comes to the crunch point. He was furthermore criticized for his focus on mundane social and moral issues, such as untouchability and the evils of liquor drinking. These were seen as distractions from the central struggle against imperialism and class-based exploitation.⁹¹

This tension regarding line of action caused increasing divergence within the *Sangh*. However these differences were mediated by Gandhi and in subsequent 5th and 6th conference in Brindaban and in Malikanda, emphasis on both constitutional politics and Constructive Work was put forward.⁹² Liberating constitutional reforms of 1920's and 1930's geared up a process of including native politicians in the government as collaborators. The opportunist Gandhi followers saw their political fortune in this process of participation. Therefore, they displayed a very unique combination of Gandhi's Constructive Work and conventional political activity for maneuvering which in turn brought them their legitimacy and popularity. In the next chapter, we will see the same strategy used by Bengal's Constructive workers in order to gain mass support for their organizational activities.

However, in order to avoid any direct confrontation with AISA and AIVIA, the sphere of influence and activity zones of the *Sangh* had always been restricted. At the *Sangh's* yearly sessions, meetings of AISA

and AIVIA were simultaneously held as most of the *Sangh* members or patrons were members or patrons of either one or both of these organizations. Each session had an exhibition of local manufactures and crafts, attended by both AISA and AIVIA. The exhibition housed artifacts related to village economic life.⁹³ However, constitutionally it remained a voluntary institution of Gandhi's followers and workers unlike AISA and AIVIA, which were created under the Congress-affiliated mandate.⁹⁴ For general propaganda, the *Sangh* not only used the methods of AISA and AIVIA, but in many instances also worked with them. Lantern slides were mainly used by the *Sangh* organizers for arranging lectures on topics such as rural co-operation, rural reconstruction, public health, national education scheme, hygiene and sanitation, etc.⁹⁵

3.7 All-India Village Industries Association (AIVIA)

The limitation in production and the fall out of its inevitable political association were among some reasons that brought a reorientation in the program of *Khadi* in 1934. At the Bombay annual session in 1934, where Gandhi's withdrawal was finalized, Gandhi received some concessions in return. He extracted a commitment from the Congress to shift its annual session from a city center to a village base. He established in this session a new Constructive Work organization called the AIVIA on 14th December, 1934 in accordance with a resolution passed by the Indian National Congress. J. C. Kumarappa was made its organizing secretary.⁹⁶ The idea of AIVIA was an outcome of the *Harijan* tours that Gandhi undertook in the aftermath of his Yarveda fast. During his tours, Gandhi realized that *Khadi* had become a lifeless symbol. In this new formulation, *Khadi* retained its centrality, being called the sun of the solar system, but attention was now also laid on a number of other village industries.⁹⁷ Other cottage industries like *Khadi* were made to cater the local market needs, thus intensification of decentralization process was given further impetus by its establishment.⁹⁸

Its prospectus included multifaceted activities since Gandhi's *Swadeshi* and *Khadi* propaganda through this new organization were expected to penetrate the regeneration process in an all-encompassing manner. Two motives were placed at the top, namely, village re-organization and reconstruction including revival,

encouragement and improvement of village industries, and the moral and physical advancement of the villagers. Therefore, for fulfilling these two motives, immediate rejuvenating steps for sanitation program, proper indigenous diet, propaganda, marketing, and training program for village industries and establishment of museum were taken up. Since AIVIA's inception, expert opinion on relative value of food was broadcasted from its provincial headquarters. The central headquarter situated at Wardha prepared the contents of these lectures. It was also engaged in wide researches on food industries. The organization established shops at Wardha and Nagpur for selling pure and unprocessed food products. From the very beginning, emphasis was put on industries based on little capital and local raw materials. Thus the headquarters at Wardha was also engaged in training of village industries and rural work. Classes and lectures were arranged on principles of Rural Economics. On December, 1938, Magan Sangrahalaya, a museum for *Khadi* and village industries was inaugurated at Wardha in memory of the late Maganlal Gandhi. It was jointly managed by AISA and AIVIA. The fund for its construction and maintenance was raised through a public fund under the name of the Magan Gandhi Smarak Fund.⁹⁹ But despite such grand opening and initial enthusiasm, AIVIA could not make much impact. Even around the turn of the decade, it remained relatively a small organization with 34 agents and 36 shops in comparison to AISA which by 1940 had well-connected provincial and local level bodies with more extensive sphere of activities.¹⁰⁰

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter in general has discussed life principles and political philosophy of Gandhi during his messianic heydays. Gandhi, being a man of decentralizing methods in his mass maneuvering strategies and rural level socio-economic regeneration, paradoxically facilitated central institutions for his ultimate goal of diversified yet homogenized India. He, in construction of the image of an ideal *Satyagrahi* or a trained Constructive Worker, maintained a top down approach of disciplinary execution. However, unfortunately, his sporadic quinine-like recovery process became subsequently marginalized both at the provincial and national levels. As the Independence came near, his unique methods were refuted at national front by

indigenous ideological or methodological alternative aspects. While fighting the colonial authority, the Congress itself was becoming the authority by inventing or reproducing modern yet traditional alternatives, mostly contributed by Gandhi himself. However through this process of production of alternatives, the Congress, ironically, gradually drifted away from the Gandhi's ideal of *Swaraj*.¹⁰¹

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Chapter 4

Gandhi's Constructive Work & the Third Emerging Moment of Self-Help in Bengal

Gandhi's popularity as a mass leader through three nationwide political campaigns was pillared on the philosophy and morality of his lifelong Constructive Work. Though discussed less by historians, as I have mentioned already, unlike his political campaigns, his Constructive Work agenda was more continuous in nature with additional hindrances.¹ Political campaigns and their unique methods made him a charismatic messiah but it was Constructive Work that made Gandhi a household name. As discussed in the previous chapter, Gandhi had two main nationwide Constructive Work organizations, each with a predecessor organization on a small scale, AISA and AIVIA. Though both of these organizations liked operating in a purely decentralized way, both of them maintained a bird's eye view supervision on subsidiary provincial organizations. Many provincial or local level organizations which claimed to follow *Khadi* and Constructive Work agenda, eventually attached themselves with either one or both of these central organizations. AISA, being a philanthropic business enterprise specialized in raw material supply, production, distribution and sale, chose such provincial or local level organizations which fitted their decentralized philanthropic commerce criteria, whereas AIVIA picked up organizations which proved to be well-suited for not only promoting, financing and improving lost or new cottage industries but also for eradicating various social evils like Untouchability. Bengal, though a province with ideals of Self-Help and *Swadeshi*

since late nineteenth century and a torch bearer of anti-colonial agitations, in later days lacked enthusiasm for Constructive Work program. In AISA and AIVIA annual reports, Bengal ranked among provinces which scored a sorry figure in Constructive Work agenda. After the suspension of the Non-Cooperation movement and the fascinating reign of Chitta Ranjan Das, Congress was gradually losing its place as a viable and trust-worthy political alternative from mid 1920's due to fights between internal factions of BPCC and a contemptuous relationship between the Congress Working Committee and the provincial leaders.² It was also around this time that finally the cracks and divisions of Bengal's rural society along the lines of pre-modern identities of religion and caste had begun to show. These identity groups, in order to advance their socio-economic backward situation, started gathering themselves around political organizations which eventually resulted in seeking out demands of privilege.³ This division along caste and communal lines in the districts of eastern Bengal was meant to happen. Bengal's eastern part was relatively rural in nature in contrast with its western counter part and here the fruits of Permanent Settlement were felt in a more deeply entrenched way. Here the landholding class belonged mostly to the upper caste Hindus and majority of the agricultural class comprised of converted Muslim peasants or lower caste Hindus and Untouchables. Day to day humiliation in every sphere surrounded this class division with discriminatory overtones.⁴ During *Swadeshi* period there were sporadic outbursts but during 1920's the rise of a new educated Muslim middle class and emergence of Dacca as a parallel alternative of Calcutta gave this suppressed dissatisfaction a way out.⁵

Congress was renowned as a homogenizing platform at an all-India level. However, due to the 'anti-*Praja*' legislative stance of the 1920's, in Bengal, it came to be seen as a party of Hindu upper caste land owners and professionals by these politically oriented identity groups. This was the same Congress that had once been renowned in Bengal for encouraging and channeling opportunities of *mufassil* and rural level participation and mass support in mainstream politics after the reform of 1919.⁶ Use of vernacular and local dialects for political speeches, mutual respect and admiration for local cultures made these inroads easier to be built. Even demographic growth rate of these small but important towns surpassed Calcutta's population growth rate which in turn marked a period of decentralization of the Calcutta-centered

high politics.⁷ 1919 was also important for vesting the rural finance responsibilities in the hands of newly formed Union Boards through the Bengal Village Self Government Act.⁸ This encouraged a rejuvenated Congress to participate in such *mufassil* or village level activities. Thus Gandhi's rise at that time signified the rise of western educated and regional language literate elites of backward areas, in place of the western educated leaders of the presidency towns. It was the loyalty networks of these local elite leaders, or the so called 'sub-contractors' of Judith Brown which mobilized popular support for Gandhi in the Indian countryside and small towns.⁹

Congress' sorry state of performance during the Civil Disobedience movement in Bengal can be shown as the greatest proof of their gradual decadence, especially in the rural areas of eastern districts.¹⁰ However, despite this supposed decline in popularity of Congress and decreasing membership, it charismatically continued to remain a part of the rural socio-economic life, though in many instances much lesser and weaker than before. This became possible because of Gandhi's Constructive Work agenda which was perceived as a promise to rejuvenate the rural socio-economic life. This agenda of Constructive Work was adhered to and adopted by many provincial level or local level organizations in Bengal who eventually became auxiliary organizations of either AISA or AIVIA or both. The *Khadi Pratishthan* of Sodepur and the *Abhay Ashram* of Comilla with their branches, spreading across the districts of Bengal, were two such organizations.

The following chapter will discuss primarily the work and importance of these two organizations. Though they attempted to portray an image of political aloofness, eventually not only did they become involved but they also made some contributions in bigger political action and decision making process. Though the *Khadi Pratishthan* more or less remained a philanthropic enterprise following its 'Big Brother' AISA with very little political involvement, some of the *Abhay Ashram* organizers became BPCC members during late 1920's. They involved themselves in labor organizational politics through association with Congress Socialist Party (CSP) and few branches went under the aegis of revolutionary activities during 1930's. Despite their differences, these two organizations, being largest in stature among all, upheld the cause of Gandhian Constructive Work and became household names and parts of community life through

their success in non-political philanthropic activities. During 1920's, Gandhi's Constructive Work's aims were not defined in any specific and illustrative way. Only the *Khadi* work received all the limelight without any encroachment from other schemes. Gandhi's all-round Constructive Program, as have been discussed already, became all-encompassing in nature after 1934 where once again *Khadi* held the central position. This reflected in AISA and AIVIA and its auxiliary bodies like the *Khadi Pratishthan* and the *Abhay Ashram's* chronology of functional prospectus. This holistic Constructive Program agenda thus promised the reunification of the nation based on its rural socio-economic life as the center of this reconstruction work and consequently helped uphold Congress' legitimacy to rule in the popular consciousness. Like the Constructive *Swadeshi* trend of *Swadeshi* movement period, this program also tried to work as a bridge between the urban educated middle class and India's millions of poor. Thus, only by gradually broadening its program, a largely reluctant Congress leadership was able to maintain its overall hegemony in a significant though always limited way.¹¹ However both these institutions, like many of their counterparts in Bengal, could neither overcome the deep-rooted Bengali tradition of late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which resulted in a unique assimilation or synthesis with Gandhian principles, nor they could ignore the troubled identity politics at the provincial level.

4.1 Prafulla Chandra Ray: His Science of *Khadi* and *Charkha*

Before going into a detailed account of the *Pratishthan*, the contribution of Prafulla Chandra Ray to the *Khadi* and *Charkha* propaganda and production in Bengal deserves an honourable mention. Even the subsequent *Khadi Pratishthan* was a surrogate child of his initiative and *Khadi-Charkha* work. Though Satish Chandra Dasgupta, a long-time associate in his venture, Bengal Chemical and Pharmaceutical Works, became the founding father of the *Pratishthan*, till his last breath, Dr. Ray remained the fountain head of financial support and enthusiasm. In fact, during the 1920's, when Chitta Ranjan Das triggered the provincialization of politics based on the distinct Bengali identity, and Pramatha Chowdhury lead the vernacularization of that identity through the print media, it was Dr. Prafulla Chandra Ray who masterfully

spearheaded the unique economic orientation of this Bengali identity.

In 1921, when Gandhi officially introduced *Charkha* as an emblem of protest against colonial rule in India, he was initially denounced by Dr. Ray for his choice of such a primitive weapon. However, both he and Satish Chandra Dasgupta witnessed its true potential when they volunteered for relief work in Khulna's famine stricken localities and the flood devastated areas of North Bengal. P. C. Ray organized a *Bangiya Sankat Tran Samiti* in the Science College, and entrusted the coordination of all rescue activities in the Rajshahi and Bogura districts to Dasgupta.¹² During this relief work, he introduced a new version of the *Charkha*, called the Khulna *Charkha*, for distribution among the poor people.¹³ Dr. Ray had observed that it was through the spinning wheel and not through his laboratory researches in Chemistry that famine could be vanquished in Bengal.¹⁴ Atrai became one of the prime bases where he and Dasgupta engaged in distribution of cotton in the surrounding villages for ginning, carding spinning and weaving. Atrai had an old silk industry that had shut down due to East India Company's mercantile policies. Dasgupta while working at the Atrai base under Dr. Ray helped standardizing the gin, the carding bow and the *Charkha*.¹⁵

In the Maniktala factory compound of Bengal Chemicals, Dr. Ray introduced *Charkha* spinning to his factory workers.¹⁶ Dr. Ray founded many organizations for the *Khadi* movement in Bengal. Such was his large contribution, that Gandhi while remarking "in points of *Swadeshi*, of all the provinces, Bengal stands at the bottom",¹⁷ took care to point out and praise the National School in Barisal, which was financially supported by Dr. Ray. He ran many centers for spinning and weaving, mostly located in the rural tracts of Chittagong. In December 1923, P. C. Ray was invited to the inaugural meeting of All-India *Khaddar* Exhibition at Kokanada in Andhra, which was held in concurrence with the annual Congress session. Here, in his speech, he defined *Charkha* as "the poor man's insurance" and a reliable source of sustenance even in times of drought, flood and other natural calamities.¹⁸ In many of his public speeches, he supported the argument laid out by Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj*, that we, the Indians were mostly responsible for our subjugation.¹⁹

4.2 The *Khadi Pratishthan*: a Philanthropic Business Enterprise

Khadi Pratishthan, the brain child of Satish Chandra Dasgupta, had its origin in its founder's experiences of working with one of the leading exponent of *Charkha* in Bengal. The rough sketch and growth of ideal for this organization were born during his Bengal Chemicals and Pharmaceutical Work days. His momentous decision of leaving the Bengal chemicals had been taken up due to ideological crisis and later Satish Chandra Dasgupta purchased a plot of about 20 acres near Sodpur, a northern suburb along the railway lines to the northern and eastern districts of Bengal.²⁰ Here he founded an ashram, which soon became the operative basis of the *Khadi Pratishthan*, the venture in which he invested all the savings he had accumulated during the years of service at the Bengal Chemical and Pharmaceutical Work.

The *Khadi Pratishthan* was officially registered as a Charitable Trust in 1925, with P.C. Ray as President and Dasgupta as Director. In its early years it expanded swiftly and established connections with different production and propaganda centers in the province, including Atrai, Feni (Noakhali), Sukhia (Chittagong), Rajshahi town. Public demonstrations, speeches and magic lantern slides were the chosen means for the *Khadi* propaganda by the *Pratishthan*.²¹ These slides, comprising some two hundred and seventy separate images, also illustrated the phases and personalities of the nationalist movement, with a special emphasis on Gandhi's story and the evolution of the Constructive Work, from Jallianwala Bagh massacre to Chitta Ranjan Das' career, and from the *Satyagraha* in South Africa to the 1922 flood relief work, in which *Charkha* played a major role.²²

The *Khadi Pratishthan* initially hired external workers for its various activities. Mostly educated, unemployed and once Non Cooperator youths from western districts of Bengal joined the *Pratishthan* at its inception.²³ Gandhi occasionally expressed his disapproval of Satish Chandra Dasgupta's adoption of industrial management methods, for Gandhi conceived *Khadi* as a different kind of enterprise. He felt that the *Pratishthan*, which was becoming a model for the entire province, should pay particular attention to the spirit behind its operation.²⁴ Even after Gandhi's suggestion, Satish Chandra Dasgupta found it extremely difficult to modify his methods, and for few subsequent years the staff at the *Pratishthan* con-

tinued to be recruited with promises of pay, at times even through newspaper advertisements. Regular pay was planned to keep the work proceeding smoothly, and to this end management and programs had to be as stable and homogenous as possible. Thus, the initial number of 25 members increased to 40 by 1927 and remuneration increased from Rs. 15 to Rs. 250.²⁵ He aimed at the establishment of a strongly supervising organization with branches in every district and with an efficient administration of the various phases of the *Khadi* work; cultivation and distribution of cotton, cloth production, sale, transport and finance. However, gradually, a community was formed around him in which hired labor was entirely substituted by volunteers and a resident community was formed. Following Gandhi's advice, the Patisthan's effort eventually gained full sympathy and support of Calcutta's Gandhi enthusiast Marwari businessmen circle. This alliance with Marwari traders might also have played a role in estranging the *Pratishthan* work from a large portion of Bengali middle class society.²⁶

Rigorous routine of ashram life started every day at 4am and continued till evening. It began with morning prayer, community reading, chorus singing, followed by routine hour for compulsory spinning and weaving, lessons on other technical and educational activities, cleaning latrines, writing daily notes on subjects such as ashram activities, family relations, Gandhi's programs etc. which were submitted to Satish Chandra Dasgupta on a daily basis for inspection. Newcomers had to pronounced eleven vows; Non Violence, Truth, Abstinence from Stealing, Celibacy, Absence of Greed, Manual Work, Absence of Greed, Fearlessness, Equality of all Religions, *Swadeshi* and Rejection of Untouchability.²⁷ These vows and rigorous daily routine of *Pratishthan* was an imitation of disciplinary life at Gandhi's Sabarmati *Ashram*.²⁸ Only the vow of vegetarianism was absent in the *Pratishthan's* list due to regional climate factors. Such was his devotion to Gandhi's way of life and thought that it earned him impertinent nicknames such as Bengal's Gandhi or Deputy Gandhi. However community life in the *Pratishthan* did not always stick to the ideal Non Violent principles and we have instances where the *Pratishthan* is seen to adhere to the traditional Bengali *Akhara* or *Samiti* culture of Self-Help, propagated by romantic nationalists in Bengal of late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In 1926, at the *Khadi Pratishthan's* community compound, a sword play demonstration was arranged by the authority.²⁹ Gandhi's disciplinary dictum of non-violence

is very often regarded as the regulatory command of a non-violent army, where physical presence and practices are more symbolic than literal. But this combination of active physical culture, duty and knowledge is unique in Bengal's context and has a deeply entrenched root in Bankim's *Anushilan*. In 1888, he wrote a long tract entitled *Dharmatattva* (the Theory of Religion) in the form of a dialogue between a teacher and his pupil, in which he set forth his concept of *Anushilan* or practice, a 'system of culture'. It is more complete and more perfect than the Western concept of culture, fundamentally agnostic and hence incomplete. His *Anushilan* was based on the concept of *Bhakti*, which in turn implied the unity of knowledge and duty.³⁰ There were, in his view, three kinds of knowledge — knowledge of the world, of the Self and of God. West had already mastered the knowledge of the world and the Self. But in case of the knowledge of God, Hindu *Shastras* contained the greatest human achievements. Mere knowledge would not create *Bhakti*; for that knowledge would have to be unified with duty. This duty meant the performance of acts without the expectation of reward. Thus, this non-possessive, non-utilitarian concept of duty was the core of Dharma or religion. Therefore, it was a cultural ideal which retained distinctively India values while subsuming what was valuable in the culture of the West. The aim was to ultimately produce a complete and perfect man.³¹ This late nineteenth-century concept was unified by Bengal's Constructive Workers with Gandhi's twentieth-century philosophy for action, *Anasakti Yoga*, to contextualize it within Bengal's unique *Swadeshi* and with the physical culture since the days of Hindu *Mela*. Thus the *Pratishthan*, though more strictly attached to the Gandhian norms, could not isolate itself from the province's individuality due to its eventual community-centric approach. In the next section, we will see how *Abhay Ashram* adopted this unique trait more assertively.

Satish Chandra Dasgupta wrote three instruction booklets in Bengali for the workers and introduced a complete system of records which was highly praised by Gandhi. There were altogether eighteen different kinds of printed account books to keep a complete record of cotton purchased, issued and stocked; of cotton purchased, issued and carded; of cotton spun and of yarn woven. There were ledgers containing records of carders, spinners and weavers besides the weekly reports and classified records of gins, carding bows, *Charkhas* and looms. The *Pratishthan's* weekly investment into the *Charkhas* and looms was three

thousand rupees. The *Pratishthan* with the help of its founding father was constantly engaged in technical innovations, as for instance the innovation of 'The Travel *Charkha*' which was publicized through Young India as the ideal solution. Even Gandhi himself adopted the Travel *Charkha* after three months of trial period.³² The demand for the *Pratishthan's* quality uniform *Khadi* grew constantly and many local bodies including Calcutta Corporation regularly placed their orders. To cater to the demands of urban population, the *Pratishthan*, not only introduced colorful and designer *Khadi* garments,³³ but a store in Calcutta, Messrs. *Khadi Pratishthan* Store was inaugurated at College Square. Stores of other *Khadi* producing institutions and village industries organizations were also situated in nearby areas, namely, Silpasram store, *Khadi* Mandal Store, *Khadi* and village industries store, *Vidyashram*, *Sudhha Khadi Bhandar*.³⁴ Thus, from being an embryonic small experiment, the *Pratishthan* developed into a big organization and opened branches in many districts of Bengal. Rajshahi town became one of the leading exponents in *Pratishthan's* work with its local *Khadi Pratishthan*, *Charkha Samiti* and *Samaj Sevak Sangha*. In Sylhet, a shop named *Khadi Pratishthan* was opened at town bazaar. Dr. Prafulla Chandra Ghosh who joined *Khadi Pratishthan* for a very short period (this episode is discussed extensively in the next section of the chapter) tried to extend its branches in Dhubri (Cochbihar) and Goalpara (Assam).³⁵ The trained contingent of the *Pratishthan's* workers regularly visited villages with cotton, spare parts, scales and account sheets. They gave cotton, collected yarn paid money, and maintained the spinners' account cards. They repaired *Charkha* and instructed them on how to improve yield. The weavers also came to the centers for procuring yarn, delivering woven *Khadi*, and getting paid.³⁶ Revival of Silk and *Tusser* industry at Birbhum's Tantipara was attempted by the *Pratishthan* workers in association with AISA. Rabindranath Tagore's *Shantiniketan* arranged a *Khadi* Exhibition in 1936 for three days in association with the *Pratishthan*. The *Pratishthan* members who organized the event were mostly AISA activists.³⁷

The *Pratishthan's* indifference towards personal riches and considerations of social status was reflected in its fundamental aloofness from politics. Nevertheless, from time to time, it followed with close attention the development of Congress activities in Bengal, and even tried to impose a particular course on them on different occasions. On the other hand, Bengali political leaders often resented the close link

with Gandhi who himself became an object of suspicion by majority of BPCC leaders. When the *Swarajya* Party was formed in 1923, Jatindra Mohan Sengupta of BPCC had explicitly requested Gandhi to instruct the *Pratishthan* and its soul father, Satish Chandra Dasgupta, not to enter the field in provincial politics.³⁸ However, Satish Chandra Dasgupta was naturally inclined to identify with the Gandhian faction and at times fully shared their anxieties and views. This happened, for example during Gandhi's pact with the *Swarajists* which drew a line between social work and political confrontation, creating some apprehension in Bengali 'No Changer' circle. Even Dasgupta did not fully approve of Gandhi's move, for he like other constructive workers, feared that in the prevailing circumstances, the intrusiveness of politics and economics would not allow scope for the progress of independent Constructive Work initiatives. The Bengal Congress' local committees so far played a major role in the diffusion of *Charkha* and by 1924 despite the initial difficulties their achievement was encouraging. But this capture of the party by Chitta Ranjan Das' loyalists threatened to impair or arrest that progress.³⁹ Satish Chandra Dasgupta was politically inactive till the end of 1927 when the nationalist movement was rejuvenated and radicalized. He was particularly anxious about the factional strife then going on in BPCC which might spread to the *Pratishthan* and other constructive work organizations. As pointed out earlier, the BPCC leadership generally assigned only a symbolic value to *Khadi* for they saw in it the emblem of India's poverty under colonial domination and the Indian masses aspiration to national resurrection. They did not really consider it a viable instrument for the resurrection which according to them, had to be accomplished through other means. The limited impact the *Khadi* work along with the virtual absence of cotton in the agricultural tradition of Bengal, made this only one item with many others in the list of anti-British activities.⁴⁰

Since the Ahmedabad Congress session in 1922 a tradition to hold *Swadeshi* goods exhibition alongside the political conference was inaugurated where *Khadi* was at the center of *Swadeshi* exhibits. A trend was set to exclude not only foreign cloth but also all other foreign commodities from Congress exhibitions. At the Madras Congress session in 1927, the tradition of holding a primary Congress session breached, and foreign textile specimens and machinery were conspicuously displayed.⁴¹ But on the eve of Calcutta Congress in 1928, the organization of a Congress exhibition was the cause of a clash between pure and

symbolic *Khadi* supporters, as the latter intended to display India's advance towards industrialization in forms of machines and machine made goods including cloth.⁴² Gandhi had heard about this dispute, and asked Jatindra Mohan Sengupta to report. The organizing committee had resolved to leave out foreign items but was still considering the exhibition of Indian industrial products. It was expected that the Indian products would be able to attract youths because they enabled entrepreneurial ventures and consequently represented sources of alternative employment. This position was highly opposed by *Khadi* workers, led by Prafulla Chandra Ghosh of the *Abhay Ashram*, Satish Chandra Dasgupta and Kshitish Chandra Dasgupta of the *Khadi* Patisthan. They appealed repeatedly to the Congress high command to revise this situation and launched a fierce propaganda against it which included boycott of the exhibition by No Changers, the *Pratishthan* and other such organizations. Gandhi perceived the episode in terms of an ultimate test of his belief in truth.⁴³ Thereafter, for some time the *Khadi* organizations of Bengal considered to hold a separate exhibition through which they wanted to denounce the BPCC's move. Gandhi, however, advised them against this for he saw in it a source of division in Congress which was symbolically the truest representation of Indian unity in his thought. Prevailing faction fights within it would disturb the unity of national movement.⁴⁴ The right course, he proposed, would rather be not joining the exhibition and to continue the Constructive Work program without wasting time and resources in political strife.⁴⁵ Har Dayal Nag, a lawyer who had served as the BPCC president for a short while and was a No Changer, proposed the formation of a new party of *Khadi* supporters within or outside the Congress, which would organize annual December exhibitions in line with the idea of Constructive Work. He had undertaken reconstruction work in the eastern regions of Tippera and Noakhali and was an active non-cooperator.⁴⁶ However, Gandhi dismissed his plan. After a while Gandhi instructed AISA centers including the *Pratishthan* to abstain from the Calcutta Exhibition. BPCC leaders, including Subhas Chandra Bose, Bidhan Chandra Roy and Jatindra Mohan Sengupta embarked on negotiations with Gandhi in order to reach a compromise, but they had to surrender in all terms. Gandhi immediately wired to Satish Chandra Dasgupta for setting up the *Khadi* pavilion in the Exhibition with products of the *Pratishthan* and other pure *Khadi* producing organizations.⁴⁷ However then it turned out that the reception committee had not actually changed

its stance. Not only had they sought support from government departments for artificial silk and other industrial products, but the Congress pavilion would also display machines, which were perceived as the sole cause of mass poverty. Satish Chandra Dasgupta as the representative of No Changers again advised non participation of the *Pratishthan* and other such organizations but Gandhi retained his consent and the dispute was over.⁴⁸

This incident was a vivid signal of BPCC's powerful faction's stand against Constructive Workers. As their ideology for constructing nation fundamentally differed in terms of means, methods and most importantly ends, their path diverged from mainstream politics in a more rapid way. Their drastic turn appeared in a new newspaper, *Rashtra Bani*. It was published as a fortnightly magazine at first on 15th February, 1929 and ran through pens of Satish Chandra Dasgupta, Hemendra Lal Ray and other No Changers and Constructive Workers. Diverse aspects of Constructive Work were discussed and debated on its pages.⁴⁹ The formation of *Rashtriya Sangha* for provincial Constructive Work by various organizations under the aegis of the *Pratishthan* was another instance of their stir willingness for distancing themselves from mainstream constitutional politics. Each member of this organization was warned against sitting in the election of the provincial legislative council. However they were allowed to cooperate with the local bodies. These local bodies completely controlled rural finances, and therefore their help was seen to be paramount in furthering the cause of Constructive Work. Satish Chandra Dasgupta and his associates under the banner of *The Praisthan* and other auxiliary organizations visited different districts, such as, 24 Parganas, Hugli, Midnapore and in the name of *Rashtriya Sangha* introduced an AISA sponsored program, called "*Bastra Sbabalamban*" (self-sufficiency in cloth) which aimed at making each family able to meet their cloth requirements. In Hugli district, 21 families undertook this vow, while an *Ashram* had been set up in Mahamaya, near Mamudpur, with the help of district Congress committee. Mahishbathan was the main center in the 24 Parganas, with a National School as the main base. In Calcutta, a *Luptasilpasram* was inaugurated where few *Khadi Pratishthan* members had made the *Bastra Sbabalamban* vow and an exceptionally fine quality of yarn they produced. Every Sunday the *Luptasilpasram* would organize a *Charkha Utsab* in a different Park of the city and on such occasions, spinning demonstration and the sale of vari-

ous products took place. The area where the movement had advanced most was the Midnapore district, with 416 *Charkhas* regularly plying largely under the supervision of the *Abhay Ashram* branches, another organization for *Khadi* and Constructive Work, followed by Hughli where an active role was played by Prafulla Chandra Sen's Arambagh *Ashram*.⁵⁰ These promising figures of self-sufficiency vows in districts indicated that districts were more in support of Constructive Work than Calcutta where conventional constitutional politics and faction fights were given more importance. Regular flag hoisting, celebration of any national Hartal or annual national week were few ground areas where these organizations used to converge with conventional political strategies.⁵¹

With the commencement of Civil Disobedience, in the first week of April, 1930, the relative aloofness of Constructive Workers was set aside. This ideology and method of Civil Disobedience, in later years became Gandhi's mantra for the success of his all-encompassing grand Constructive Program. A group of about 100 volunteers was led by Satish Chandra Dasgupta and other *Pratishthan's* stalwarts in a march from Sodpur to Mahishbathan to break the salt law. The protest continued by 800 *Satyagrahis* in well-disciplined manner, such as, picketing at liquor shops, public meetings and fiscal disobedience in Mahishbathan. Eventually, many volunteers moved to Contai when the base at Mahishbathan became weak due to police oppression.⁵² The distribution of Gandhi *Sahitya* in Bengali and English at low prices was a major initiative of the *Pratishthan* during and after the suspension of Civil Disobedience movement. Gandhi's Constructive Work during the movement took such an overarching form that it worked as an ice breaker between the *Pratishthan's* founder and his wife Hem Prabha Devi's cold relation. Her participation as nurturing protector of the Sodpur center of the *Pratishthan* during long absence of other towering figures including her husband, made her aware of the deeper dimension of Gandhi's constructive work. She managed to overcome her indifference and established an open channel of understanding with *Mahatma*.⁵³ This brief association with mainstream nationalist movement took a heavy toll on the *Pratishthan's* non-political image when Sodpur center was searched repeatedly in 1935 and 1936.⁵⁴

After the Civil Disobedience movement when Gandhi was again on the verge of a philosophical bankruptcy, introduction of a new all-encompassing moral and practical propaganda, Constructive Program came out

as an end result and the *Pratishthan* updated its list of work in accordance to that. Following this, a variety of other cottage industries were added to the *Pratishthan's* activities, and by 1937, production of paper, ink soap, matches, the treatment of jute, the extraction of combustible gas from cow dung, as well as food industries such as Gur (molasses), extraction from resinous barks, honey and wax processing, production of improved type of Ghani and Dhenki, were in a full swing.⁵⁵ The match making industry was given a serious impetus during this period and the *Pratishthan* published a small manual tract on this theme. This was initiated because it could be installed both in cottages and in large factories. India, depended on Japan and Sweden mainly for import of Safety Matches, had a large internal market for manufacture and sale of this. An increasingly troubled trading relation with Japan created a vacuum in internal market which could be easily fulfilled by indigenous manufacturers. This resulted in getting attention of the *Pratishthan's* organizers.⁵⁶ However, the disruption of communal harmony, especially in the districts like Noakhali, was too big and serious an issue for the *Pratishthan* workers to confront and continue their program successfully. These districts of South East Bengal, had an old traditional base for handloom industry and were seen as a potential hub for Chakrha and *Khadi* industry.⁵⁷ Thus naturally, the *Pratishthan* tried to build *Khadi* and other Cottage industries at these sites but could not make any headway because these initiatives were perceived in popular consciousness as a new conspiracy of Congress, which had, by then, gained a reputation of being a party of Calcutta *bhadraloks* or a party of upper caste oppressor Hindu landlords.⁵⁸

Harijan Work, one important aspect of Gandhi's Constructive Program, was also ticked and attempted by the *Pratishthan*. The *Pratishthan's* *Harijan* work started after *Mahatma's* epic fast at Yarveda which ended with Poona pact in 1935. Though this pact worked as a final stroke of division between Congress Working Committee and BPCC, it gave a positive impetus for *Harijan* work in many provinces including Bengal. Especially in Calcutta, Satish Chandra Dasgupta and his brother started a hygiene education program in the Bastis, which continued to be conducted by the *Khadi* *Pratishthan* volunteers for many years even after independence. Interestingly enough Gandhi did not entirely approve of these initiatives because *Harijan* Work, he remarked, was not a business like enterprise for which the *Pratishthan* was renowned.⁵⁹ But Gandhi exhorted the *Pratishthan* to continue work in Calcutta *Bastis*. Satish Chandra Dasgupta tried,

nevertheless, to propagate his and Gandhi's opinions on Untouchability and other issue by starting a Bengali edition of the *Mahatma's* new paper, *Harijan*, to which he also contributed articles and comments. Initially, it had a good circulation, but very soon it faced enormous financial difficulties and was advised to interrupt its publication.⁶⁰

An important aspect of the *Pratishthan's* effort to organize *Khadi* work and other Cottage industries in Bengal was the publication of short essays and manuals containing relevant information on materials, instruments, and administrative principles. After 'Charkar Byabahaar', '*Khadi* Manual' was issued in 1924 in two volumes, printed and published at the *Pratishthan* under Hem Prabha Devi's supervision. *Khadi* Manual, an exhaustive tract on the subject, was intended for all Indian *Khadi* workers.⁶¹ There was a Medical section in the *Pratishthan's* Sodpur center, where enthusiastic experiments resulted in 'Home and Village doctors', two condensed and bulky volumes, published by the *Pratishthan* early in 1940 which was approved enthusiastically in *Harijan*.⁶² Another of the *Pratishthan's* publication, 'The Cow in India',⁶³ a comprehensive book on cattle rearing and anatomy in two volumes, written by Satish Chandra Dasgupta, was described by Gandhi as "most authentic and perhaps complete information about the cow and the buffalos."⁶⁴ Here to be mentioned that Gandhi's first statement about cow protection was part of a chapter in *Hind Swaraj* entitled "The condition of India, The Hindus and the Mahomedans." Gandhi's references to cow protection throughout his life were nearly always connected with Hindu Muslim relations. Whenever Hindus became militant in this matter, and fostered cow protection societies, the killing of cows increased, showing not only the immorality but also the futility of the exercise. He reiterated his basic accusation that the cow was ill-treated in India (primarily by Hindus) more than elsewhere and that cow protection societies were counter-productive: they were an excuse to attack the Muslims.⁶⁵

4.3 The *Abhay Ashram*: an Epitome of Bengali Community Life and Tradition

The *Abhay Ashram* was established as a result of accumulation process between young patriots, who wished to put into practice the ideals they had begun to cherish well before the advent of *Mahatma* Gandhi. Its organizers found a mediation between the heritage of the late nineteenth and early twentieth Bengali nationalist thought and the new ideas and programs propagated by Gandhi, thereby, was more in tune with Bengal's tradition.

In the early 1910s, a group, consisting of students was formed in Calcutta. It was called the Brotherhood, or *Anami Sangha* (Anonymous Community), and was attended by some of the future organizers of the *Abhay Ashram*, including Suresh Chandra Banerji, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, Nripendra Nath Basu and Annada Prasad Chaudhuri. The object of the group was to bring about synthesis between religion and nationalism, not merely in the theoretical sphere but in practical experience as well. They were mainly influenced by teachings and principles of Swami Vivekananda and Aurobindo Ghosh but reserved a strong resentment against violent revolutionary activities. This resulted in drifting away of more radical members like Subhas Chandra Bose and Hemanta Kumar Sarkar after a short period.⁶⁶

In 1920, when Suresh Banerji resigned from the post of army medical officer, the remaining members of Sangha who later formed the first nucleus of the *Abhay Ashram* chalked out a plan for a permanent *Ashram*.⁶⁷ By the time, the emergence of *Mahatma* on national front with his philosophy of moral and practical action worked as a bridge between their hitherto existent philosophical germination and their aim of servicing the nation. They visited and approached Gandhi in 1921 with their aim of illustrating their project and asked for his blessings.⁶⁸ The name *Abhay Ashram* was suggested by Gandhi instead of Sabita Ashram proposed by them. Abhay or fearlessness was not only one of the exponent vows of Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram but also in his eyes, was one of the major traits of Bengal's nationalist tradition, of late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The realization of truth as the real purpose of service and to adopt non-violence as the practical expression of that ideal was suggested by Gandhi as Ashram inmates line

of ascetic activism. The vows, submitted to Gandhi, were in the following order: vow of Fearlessness, vow of Truth, vow of Purity, vow of Non-Stealing, vow of Activity, vow of Love, vow of *Swadeshi*.⁶⁹ The vows, though almost all taken from the Sabarmati *Ashram*, emphasized fearlessness more than truth, while celibacy and control of the appetite were covered by the vow of purity; the vow against Untouchability was absent, and replaced by new vows of activity and love which were apparently in tune with Vivekananda's philosophy of action. The project was sanctioned and the group was exhorted to ply the *Charkha* and stand united behind Chitta Ranjan Das' lead. Thus *Abhay Ashram* was established in a hired apartment in Dacca. The small community observed a well-planned daily routine, with prescribed hours of wakefulness and sleep, morning and evening prayers, hand spinning, reading, physical exercise, cleaning and other domestic duties.⁷⁰

Though it was an organization run on the line of Gandhi's Constructive Work philosophy, from the very beginning it showed more interest in mainstream political participation and decision making process. The *Ashram* members decided to join Congress politics and contested the election of the party district committee. In Dacca, however, the Congress organization was strictly controlled by the *Anushilan Samiti*, and this made it impossible for the Ashram members to play any role in it or to influence the decision making process. They soon resolved and took up constructive work in the villages. The same year they started working at Malikanda and its surrounding area, a village of Bikrampur Subdivision and made it a permanent base for future.⁷¹

During Non-Cooperation movement, the ashramites went round the villages of Dacca's countryside visiting Meghula, Dohar, Nababganj, Laksmipur and other villages. They organized public assemblies in weekly and permanent markets, preached the national ideal in temples and mosques, founded Congress committees at grass root level, appealed for voluntary enrolment in Congress or the *Ashram* and collected funds for Congress or the *Ashram* work.⁷² As a result, Suresh Chandra Banerji and Prafulla Chandra Ghosh were elected to the BPCC. But the real hindrance to Congress' *Khadi* or other constructive work in rural areas of Eastern Bengal was division of rural community along the lines of pre-modern identities which in turn clustered around modern political demands. When the *Abhay Ashram* planned on work-

ing for Congress propaganda and Constructive means and ends in Namasudra majority districts of South East Bengal, it faced the gritty reality of rural socio-economic life and their consciousness. In Namasudra community's view Congress was a middle-class or upper-caste organization, so its initiatives were looked down upon with hostility.⁷³ Even though Suresh Chandra Banerji had planned to open an *Abhay Ashram* branch in Gopalganj in order to work for Namasudras, but his plan could not be implemented due to various material difficulties and inertia of local Namasudra community itself.

In the following months, Suresh Chandra Banerji resumed his fund raising tours. The *Ashram* centers in Malikanda, Farshail and Nababganj⁷⁴ were still open but their first base in Dacca where Ananda Prasad Chaudhuri was in charge of about 15 volunteers, had to be closed for the lack of funds. But production of pure *Khadi* under the banner "Joychandra Boyonagar" in the Dacca garden estate of Joychandra Dutta, a benevolent financier of the organization not only continued, also gradually became a weaving school.⁷⁵ Early in 1923, they shifted to a new center in suburb area of Comilla town. Here a large plot of land with an artificial pond had been acquired amidst rice fields in a predominantly Muslim area.⁷⁶ The expenses for the land purchase and reclamation as well as for the construction were met with donations from some Ashramite's relatives, from sympathetic people at Comilla and from Satish Chandra Dasgupta. Dasgupta, who would later go on to found the *Khadi Pratishthan*, was still an employee of the Bengal Chemical and Pharmaceutical Works and was very friendly with Prafulla Chandra Ghosh. In 1923, as cholera broke out at Bajapti, near Chandpur, Suresh Chandra Banerji and few Ashram associates received their first opportunity to serve the rural population as the town authorities asked them to cooperate in setting up and running of a first aid center. In this way, their social service was explicitly linked with national regeneration work.⁷⁷

Since the inauguration of the main branch at Comilla, five departments, namely, Medical, *Charkha* and *Khaddar*, Education, Library and Agriculture, were given prior importance. By its second year, 20 full time workers were engaged in the *Ashram* work.⁷⁸ The Library department happened to be this center's main attraction with 1500 books and 150 members in 1923⁷⁹ which increased to 1700 books, 32 newspapers and 200 members in 1924.⁸⁰ Its reading room became the center of the local community life

where people from all strata and background came to discuss about communal harmony and removal of Untouchability alongside major nationalist issues.⁸¹ These two issues were gradually encroaching in Bengal's rural side, their vicious tentacles troubling the traditional harmonious life of rural community, which was the nucleus element of India's Civilizational superiority.⁸² This could be compared with the Irish Co-operative movement's spearhead organization the Irish Agricultural Organization Society's meeting halls discussions. They provided venues for rural nationalists to meet and discuss politics, since the philosophy of Self-Help and unity promoted by the society appealed to many in the nationalist cause.⁸³ The *Abhay Ashram's* dispensary earned some reputation and the doctors who were deployed here for their will to serve the poor⁸⁴, did not miss the chance to propagate the ideal of *Swadeshi* and to appeal for a boycott of foreign cloth. The literate visitors were asked to read out a table indicating the *Abhay Ashram's* two main objectives; *Swaraj* and Hindu-Muslim unity. This concept of *Swaraj*, always remained 'vaguely delightful' in Gandhi's speeches since he never attributed any proper definition for it. These Bengali Gandhi enthusiasts, though ambiguous in their own understanding, shared nonetheless the same concept of *Swaraj*; the self-rule of nation's socio-economic condition and most importantly of one's own body and mind. Following the success of this dispensary, by the third year of its inception, a clinical laboratory at the organization's Comilla branch was established. A surgical hospital with an accommodation of 20 indoor patients was opened in 1926. The Ashram's Medical Department under Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerji showed every intention at the second annual meet, of starting a medical school for students interested in village service.⁸⁵ At its 3rd annual meet, on 22nd February, 1926, Rabindranath Tagore was invited as the main speaker who praised enthusiastically Comilla branch's work.⁸⁶

Initially the *Ashram* branch in Comilla was able to establish only a Pathsala, regularly attended by only 20 children of local cultivators.⁸⁷ But in 1925, three more schools were added in the list; one school at Metharpatti with 22 students, one night school at the Ashram compound with 10 students and the *Abhay Ashram* secondary school with 120 students which later to become *Abhay Ashram* Sikshayatan in 1926.⁸⁸ The syllabus of this school not only included necessary subjects but also consisted of, in 4 year lower section, classes on carding and spinning and in 4 year upper section, courses on handicrafts and

science subjects, where the choices were from carpentry, tailoring, agriculture, gardening, textile dyeing, printing, weaving, medicine, *Khadi* production and organization, book binding and Constructive Work literature. In this context, it should be mentioned here that an all-around development of technical and vocational training at primary, secondary and university level in Bengal had already been requested by intellectuals. The scheme, as chalked out, would have its humble beginnings in agricultural and handicraft training at primary level, the establishment of separate agricultural, industrial and trade schools at secondary level, and the introduction of new faculties at university level for disciplines such as technology, commerce, agriculture and sanitation.⁸⁹ Nationalist discourse on education in twentieth century was thus based on all-around personality development through the ideals of Self-Help.⁹⁰ By the end of the 1920's, the *Sikshyatan* counted 31 lower sections in the districts of Dacca, Tripura and Bankura, and 3 upper sections at Kumilla, Nababganj and Malikanda. The number of students thus rose to 1,257.⁹¹ Therefore, the school and its curriculum reflect nationalist ideals of education which for the first time in Bengal province was practically implemented during the *Swadeshi* movement of 1905–1911. But the moment of germination was laid in late nineteenth century cultural nationalism when elevating emphasis on national education through ancient Gurukul model was gaining momentous.⁹² Vivekananda's life building and character making assimilation of ideas, followed by the *Abhay Ashram* organizers, also had vivid points of emphasis pertaining education on national lines.⁹³ However, here a similarity can be drawn between the *Abhay Ashram Sikshayatan's* curriculum and Liang Shumming's blueprint on Chinese Village education system in his Rural Reconstruction scheme. He also had aversion to urban life and culture, particularly pronounced in the field of education. He wanted rural schools to respond to rural needs instead of just turning generation after generation of educated village youths into parasitic urbanites. By that time, he believed, the organic social structures and moral codes of traditional rural communities had already been smashed by the Western modernity that had been forced upon China, so if the villages were to fulfill their historical role they would have to be resurrected through educational reforms implemented by idealistic urban intellectuals.⁹⁴

Charkha did not actually play a central role in the *Abhay Ashram's* activity list for long after the suspen-

sion of Non Cooperation movement. This had been denounced by Gandhi, who was otherwise pleased with their success in other fields, during his visit in 1925.⁹⁵ Apparently, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh had throughout been more active with *Khadi* work than Suresh Chandra Banerji. He introduced a less expansive but higher quality method for dyeing and printing *Khadi* cloth. Thus while on one hand, this creation of a united and determined band of volunteer ashramites differentiated the *Abhay Ashram* from the *Khadi Pratishthan*, which rather grew as a big family of young and grown-up sympathizers involved in *Khadi* work and Constructive activities. And on the other, this impersonal, open and ecumenical character of the *Khadi Pratishthan* reflected the Sabarmati *Ashram* model more than the *Abhay Ashram* which was claimed by its organizers 'a community living of Bengali joint family ideals'.⁹⁶ This spirit of traditional community life of solidarity was experienced by the *Ashramites* round the year on certain occasions, such as yearly religious celebrations of Durga *Puja*, *Janmasthami*, Saraswati *Puja* and anniversaries of various kinds.⁹⁷ At the end of every Bengali year, the *Ashram* organized a public *Mela*,⁹⁸ following the *Chaitra Mela* or Hindu *Mela* tradition of late nineteenth century in which speeches, magic lantern shows and other initiatives were organized.

The *Ashram* also remained more active than the *Khadi Pratishthan* in terms of physical practice culture of Self-Help tradition which had its root in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengali *Samiti* and *Akhara* tradition, inspired by Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Anushilan Dharma*. Annual competitions of weight lifting, tug-of-war and *lathi* play used to be organized by its various branches on special days or occasions. Bankura branch even had a regular boy scout.⁹⁹ The birthday of Shivaji, the symbolic hero of national martial prowess and a popular theme of romantic valorization by the late nineteenth century Bengali nationalists, was annually celebrated at its Tippera branch along with various athletic games.¹⁰⁰ A meeting at Bankura branch on 4th April 1928 was presided over by Bhupesh Chandra Dutta who confirmed that the *Ashram's* true ideal was the improvement of the physique of the young men.¹⁰¹ The Feni branch of the *Ashram*, started in 1924, established a well-equipped gymnasium for local youths and members.¹⁰² Bankura *Abhay Ashram* arranged demonstration of *lathi* and *dagger* play by a disciple of Dacca *Anushilan Samiti's* touring figure, Pulin Bihari Das.¹⁰³ These initiatives made the *Abhay Ashram*, particularly popular

among the youths. Many youth associational meetings were frequently presided over by Suresh Chandra Banerji and Prafulla Chandra Ghosh. All Bengal Youth Association's frontline organizers were closely associated with the *Abhay Ashram* organizers.¹⁰⁴

One interesting incident instances clearly that the *Ashram* members did not always follow Gandhian way of non-violence and communal harmony and consequently became a prey of provincial communal situation and ongoing popular communal nationalist thought. Here to be mentioned that Gandhi's use of religious idioms to mobilize the masses was not revivalism of the earlier politicians as he was not referring to history but to religious morality. But provincial or local level political sub-contractors had very little control over this groundswell and here lays the paradox of Gandhian politics, for he always wanted not just any mass upsurge, but a controlled mass movement.¹⁰⁵ One *Janmastami* festival at Comilla Branch was celebrated through a procession and the participants "were carrying iron spearheads concealed by wrapping them up in lotus buds and colorful paper.... Beating various drums and carrying various banners and flags made out of pointed bamboo." This resulted in a riot pertaining to the typical music before the mosque issue. Even declaration of curfew barely managed to stop the violence.¹⁰⁶ Even to counter the village work of the *Abhay Ashram's* Tippera branch, an institution named *Nirbhay Ashram* was formed by local notable Muslim organizers.¹⁰⁷ Thus fear complex rather than cultural revivalism provided communalism its basis in Bengal.¹⁰⁸ This incidence clearly illustrates the hollowness of the whole approach of Constructive Work which was ultimately operated through such a top down method that it could never capture the local realities and people's communal consciousness. His novel political ideology appealed to few wholly but to many partially or vaguely.¹⁰⁹

The *Abhay Ashram* went through a considerable expansion in the late 1920's and early 1930's. The *Khadi* department initially trained volunteer spinners and weavers in the *Ashram* compound; later, some of them were sent on mission into the interior for propagating the use of *Charkha*, supplying raw cotton and purchasing the yarn and cloth produced out of their supply.¹¹⁰ By 1926, *Abhay Ashram's Khadi* shops were opened in Dacca, Noakhali town and Chittagong town. Calcutta Corporation during the year 1925–26, accepted Comilla *Abhay Ashram's* tender for supply of *Khadi* clothing for corporation employees.¹¹¹

Abhay Ashram became a regular participant at various *Khaddar* exhibitions organized by BPCCC.¹¹² By the end of 1920's, twenty branches of the Ashram were active over the province, with 63 fulltime workers. Branches of the Ashram were opened in districts, such as, Noakhali, Chittagong, Faridpur, Jalpaiguri, Nadia, Murshidabad, Bankura, Midnapore, Calcutta, Barisal, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Agartala, Tripura state.¹¹³ In presenting the achievement of the *Abhay Ashram* to the readers of Young India, Gandhi stressed that "the Ashram in fact represents the spirit of sacrifice, of which Bengal is probably among all the provinces, the finest repository", and appealed for help to "this great institution."¹¹⁴ Cooperation among the members regarding constructive work, simple and honest life attracted Gandhi's praise and he wanted it to be an example both for city dwellers and for villagers.¹¹⁵

In fact, as has been mentioned before, the *Abhay Ashram* branches and mainly few of their leading organizers had a greater keenness in mainstream politics than any other Gandhi's *Charkha* and *Khaddar* work or Constructive Work organizations in Bengal which continued during Civil Disobedience movement as well. This movement triggered a brief period of political participation for other such organizations. On 18th February, 1928, a private meeting of executive members of DCC of Midnapore was held at the local *Abhay Ashram* branch, where a proposal for a public demonstration as a protest against the Simon Commission and boycott of British goods was passed.¹¹⁶ Tipper DCC while celebrating national week, lent their full support for the *Abhay Ashram* which was then simultaneously preparing for its 8th annual meet.¹¹⁷ Even Gandhi was unable to always keep conventional politics and Constructive Work separate in Bengal. When Gandhi was asked in 1941 by Sachidranath Mitra for permission to organize a *Sevadal*, Mitra was instructed by him to ask BPCCC at first for the permission.¹¹⁸ This incident illustrates the links between a completely philanthropic social service initiative and mainstream politics. Even when his argument for inter marriage and inter dining was perceived jeopardizing mainstream political cause in Bengal, it was instructed to be withheld to a personal level.¹¹⁹ This middling stance taken by Constructive Workers and Rural Reconstruction organizers in Bengal was often criticized by completely apolitical rural uplift enthusiasts or intellectuals. Thus W. W. Pearson declared futility of any political middle man in the establishment of ideal *Swaraj* in villages.¹²⁰ Benoy Kumar Sarkar went a step forward, asked directly gov-

ernment's all around involvement in upliftment schemes to avoid further involvement of political activists in such work.¹²¹

Representatives of both the *Abhay Ashram* and the *Khadi Pratishthan* joined the Bengal Council for Civil Disobedience, and worked surprisingly cordially in organizing the movement. They, on many occasions, had differences which in many instances created hindrances for the expansion of their Constructive Work propaganda. This episode is discussed in detail in a later part of this chapter. Bankura town was selected as the headquarter of the *Abhay Ashram's* campaign, and from there, Suresh Chandra Banerji led a salt march to Pichabani, a village on the sea coast in the district of Midnapore, not very far from Contai, the *Khadi Pratishthan* volunteers' base for salt manufacture.¹²² Pichabani was chosen due to the local record of a *Satyagraha* struggle conducted by Birendra Nath Sasmal against the introduction of Union Boards.¹²³ In Contai, Pafulla Chandra Ghosh along with a local school teacher at the Contai National School, Pramatha Nath Bandyopadhyay organized the same campaign. The trio got arrested and was sent to Alipore Central Jail.¹²⁴ Suresh Chandra Banerji and Prafulla Chandra Ghosh were sentenced to two and a half years imprisonment, but were released soon after the Gandhi Irwin pact in March 1931. When the campaign resumed early in 1932, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh was again arrested and jailed until July 1933. In Dacca, *Abhay Ashram* leaders Debendra Nath Sen and Dhiresh Chakraborty started anti-union Board agitation, appealed for a boycott of government schools and even resorted to fasting. They were both arrested in July 1930 and again in January, 1931.¹²⁵ The Calcutta branch, though founded mainly as sale's depot of *Khadi*, eventually started publishing paper, books and bulletins to advocate no tax campaign, and boycott of British goods during this movement. This particular branch grew remarkable influence on BPCC's powerful faction during Civil Disobedience movement.¹²⁶ The government ultimately banned the *Abhay Ashram* during 1932 under Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1908.¹²⁷ Nripendra Nath Basu, however, used a stratagem to prevent confiscation. A few hours after the ordinance, he drew up a formal donation of the ashram properties to the AISA. The ban was enforced until the enactment of the new constitutional law in 1937.

During Non-Cooperation movement the majority of ignited districts in Bengal were in Eastern part.

From the end of the 1921 until March 1922, many eastern districts, especially Tippera, Rangpur and Noakhali had refused to pay taxes.¹²⁸ And during these years many *Ashram-like* institutions were established not only as auxiliaries of ongoing movement but also for its new resolutions affirming the importance of habitually wearing *Khadi* as an ideal for party members,¹²⁹ which in turn, needed more *Khadi* work organizations at local levels. By successfully preaching for such propaganda, the Eastern districts became a center head for Gandhian workers and their organizations. In subsequent years many of them were closed down due to lack of funds but some of them flourished in manifolds.¹³⁰ It should be mentioned here that despite having personal reservations regarding Gandhian way of politics, Chitta Ranjan Das was the first politician in Bengal who voiced genuine concern regarding ruination of village socio-economic life. His genuine initiative of village reconstruction fund ill-fatedly inherited ambivalence of *Swadeshi* movement's class and communal limitations. By the end of 1922, nearly two and half lakhs of rupees were collected to bring relief to peasants, Hindu and Muslim alike. But by the mid of 1924, according to an estimate by the government of Bengal only Rs. 2000 of the fund seemed to work in the villages.¹³¹

The districts of Bengal once contained 150 sub divisions but by 1928 only sixty of these sub divisions possessed any congress committee. More over the organization had lost what was already a precarious footing in the villages. There were very few village congress committees whose members were mostly nearby town dwellers. Local level organization of Congress in Bengal thus remained weak and unevenly distributed during Civil Disobedience movement.¹³² From the days of the Civil Disobedience movement, the Constructive Work propaganda had also started losing its way in the Eastern districts. The constant effort that was put into preaching its ideals by Nawabganj *Ashram*, Kashipur *Ashram*, Dinajpur National School and Sylhet *Vidyashram* was in vain due to the lack of participation of Muslims and lower castes like *Namasudras*,¹³³ who in some districts actively sided with the Government. In the Eastern districts the economic crisis caused agitation but now it was against the Congress, since the troubles of the tenants were blamed on the landlords and their party. Ten out of eleven Civil Disobedience centers organized by BPCC were in fact in Western districts, just next door to Calcutta. Even highest number of imprisonment and most violent acts happened in Midnapore district of Western Bengal.¹³⁴ In East Bengal, Mymensingh,

Noakhali and Rajshahi still claimed large membership but here some of the traditional centers of Congress stronghold such as Dacca, Chittagong, Barisal were clearly in decline. This isolation from people was most marked in the East Bengal districts because the new electors were mostly Muslims or low caste Hindus.¹³⁵ Only exceptional case in Eastern Bengal was Birkutsa *Satyagraha*, where Muslim peasants selected an upper caste Hindu Congress worker as their leader to oppose illegal tax extraction and other humiliating economic burden by local high caste Hindu *Zamindar*.¹³⁶ This precarious condition of Congress' political base in rural Bengal troubled Constructive Work propaganda. The suspension of Civil Disobedience movement lead to a crisis situation and a vacuum of this resulted in facilitating entry points for several other factors which complicated the scenario.

Here the relationship between Gandhi's national level Constructive Program organization, AIVIA and the *Abhay Ashram* deserves a mention. *Abhay Ashram* and other such organizations being a victim of political miscalculation in the 1920's, started reorienting themselves towards different work strategies. After the appalling performance of Congress during Civil Disobedience movement in one of its once strongholds, the *Ashram* gradually associated itself with AIVIA activities to make their bases more strong. This all India level collaboration was done to give their means a new impetus. Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, a founding member of the *Ashram* and one of the touring figures among Bengal's Constructive Work initiative, remained an AIVIA Executive council member since its inception. Through this affiliation, they hoped to spread their networks in a more decentralized way. Besides inauguration of new centers in completely new areas hitherto untouched by them or any other such organizations, new schemes and methods were added to their to-do list. By the end of 1935, within one year of its foundation, AIVIA, received a membership of 4230 ordinary ones members with 61 agents, 27 certified shops and 5 affiliated provincial institutions and the *Abhay Ashram* was one of them.¹³⁷ By 1935, 50 agents, mostly the *Abhay Ashram* members, were deployed in Bengal for AIVIA work. In Bankura, Birbhum, 24 Parganas, Dacca, Faridpur and Comilla, traditional strongholds of the *Ashram's* work, the program and propaganda were taken to an all-round level.¹³⁸ However, in Hugli, Rajshahi, Malda, Sylhet and Barisal, the work received limited enthusiasm to grow.¹³⁹ Sushil Chandra Palit of Betur *Abhay Ashram*, Bankura took up the work in sur-

rounding 16 villages.¹⁴⁰ At Diamond Harbor, a sub division of 24 Parganas, the work of AIVIA was taken up by the *Khadi Mandir* in association with *Harijan Sevak Sangha* where *Abhay Ashram* workers were deployed for this.¹⁴¹ The village industries that were given serious impetus by AIVIA in Bengal in collaboration with the *Abhay Ashram* members were *ghani*, chrome making, paper manufacture, chrome tanning, *talgur* making, bee-keeping, organic fertilizers etc. From its inception, the restriction of jute production in Bengal became one of its primary targets. The jute industry was totally dependent upon mercantile whims that caused additional misery to peasants in adverse market conditions. Since this condition of jute industry did not conform to AIVIA's decentralization goals, the *Ashram's* scheme gained significant importance (AIVIA Bengal, Annual report). Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, an executive member of AIVIA's central body took up the charge of duty in Dacca¹⁴² while Nripendra Nath Basu controlled the AIVIA work in Comilla under the aegis of *Abhay Ashram's* Comilla branch.¹⁴³ Total 5 schools were inaugurated in Birbhum under the Palit brother of the Betur *Ashram*, including one night school and total student count reached 225 in 1936.¹⁴⁴ At Faridpur in 1936, lessons were given by the *Ashram* workers under AIVIA's banner for essential hygiene and sanitation to fight recent cholera outbreak in the district. Their constant effort and use of cholera vaccine injection brought the epidemic under control in two months.¹⁴⁵ Eradication of water hyacinth became another matter of concern for them as it initiated real hindrances to pure drinking water sources.¹⁴⁶ One Pathsala and three primary schools were established in Comilla where by June, 1936, all total 686 students including boys and girls from both the communities were admitted.¹⁴⁷ In Birbhum and Comilla, the *Abhay Ashram* workers with financial assistance of AIVIA introduced courses on improved tanning techniques for local caste cobblers.¹⁴⁸

During and after the suspension Civil Disobedience movement, major changes happened in terms of underground activity of the *Abhay Ashram* which again proved the futility of hierarchical method of Gandhi's Constructive Work in Bengal's context. Any top down approach for an apolitical rural upliftment scheme was always vehemently criticized by eminent figures of Rural Reconstruction in Bengal. A rural level cooperative method of understanding was sought for actual Rural Reconstruction by Leonard K. Elmhirst of Sriniketan institution. This whole propaganda had a homogenizing echelon toned on it

which a band of professional and rigidly trained Constructive Workers or Professional *Satyagrahis* were expected to perform.¹⁴⁹ The agendas were also strictly unifying in character and had rare instances of catering purely local criteria and necessities despite having a tag line of decentralized approachability of working method. This solely overarching homogenizing inroads of Gandhi's Constructive Work program often overlooked provincial or local gritty realities which its provincial or local level associational bodies could not underestimate. The rural masses remained the objects of the reforms and never became active subjects. They were often hostile to the urban intellectuals and resisted changes. In 1936, after five years of Rural Reconstruction work in Zouping, China, Liang Shumming also drew similar disillusioned conclusion.¹⁵⁰ Surprisingly, these Constructive Work schemes altogether had a bottom to top aim in nation building but was in practice, time and again, initiated a reverse form of approach in both these countries. The *Abhay Ashram* in Bengal and its activities throughout 1930's perhaps was its finest example. These revolutionary under currents worsened the already prevalent schism between the *Ashramites* and this permanent blot of divergence caused hindrances in path of the Ashram's actual aims.

Many of the *Ashram's* different branch members and workers became either participant or associate in revolutionary or left political groups. The suspension of the Civil Disobedience movement, like its predecessor Non Cooperation movement provided again a phase of political void, methodological disillusionment and ideological bankruptcy which was again to be fulfilled like before with viable alternatives. Jogesh Chandra Chatterji and Gobinda kar, of the Kakori Conspiracy case fame, became its members at Comilla branch. Prafulla Bhattacharji, ex-state prisoner of Mechuabazar conspiracy case, later joined the Calcutta branch as a member. Jagadananda Mukherji, convicted in Cornwallis street arms case, later became a regular visitor and associate of the Ashram's Calcutta branch. Nihar Ray, suspect in Barisal Sub inspector shooting case, later became a full time member of the Feni branch which was suspected of having a link with the Chittagong's nationalist revolutionaries. Members of the Ashram branches at districts of Noakhali, Midnapore, Barisal, Dacca and Bankura were influenced by revolutionary activities and occasionally joined these activities too directly. *Jugantar* and *Anushilan* group usually took the leading charge in such activities and their participation.¹⁵¹ There was a close connection between Garbetta *Abhay Ashram*

Revolutionary Group and Bankura *Abhay Ashram* Group and both these were associated with Bipin Ganguli's Hindustan Socialist Revolutionary Army (HSRA). Thus, these links in turn forced police to trace the supposed existence of a more large scale centrally organized revolutionary association, operating under the cloak of decentralized Constructive Work by AISA and AIVIA.¹⁵² Though much progress was not achieved in this but one Garbetta *Abhay Ashram* member, Ram Sundar Singh, earlier associated with Amiya Bose of Comilla *Abhay Ashram* (a convict of a mail robbery case), had links with armed dacoits and armed smuggling groups. When Comilla *Abhay Ashram* was declared illegal, the young members who were sent to Midnapore via Kolkata were recruited to *Anushilan* by Ram Sundar Singh in Association with Satin Mukhuti, main Suspect of D.M. Peddie's murder case.¹⁵³ But these underground activities had one serious limitation. Like the previous phases of nationalist revolutionary activities, there was still an absence of Muslim participation. However, this trend was not something new in Bengal as have been already discussed in chapter one. During *Swadeshi* movement too, the future organizers of revolutionary activities initially were attracted, for a short while though, towards Constructive *Swadeshi* schemes.¹⁵⁴

The socialist turn of a section of the *Ashramites* was a result of Suresh Chandra Banerji's ideological turn after Civil disobedience movement. In a letter to Jagadis Basu, in which Suresh wrote, "When I began my life, I was a devoted disciple of Vivekananda, then I became a disciple of Gandhiji, and now of Lenin"¹⁵⁵ made this point clear. Politically by this time, he came close to Subhas Chandra Bose and became his ardent supporter because both of them started sharing same views on the development schemes for national regeneration which fell along the lines of heavy industries and scientific progress as opposed to Gandhi's.¹⁵⁶ He himself joined CSP and established its branches at district level. At one occasion while giving a public speech, he was addressed as high priest of revolution by the audience.¹⁵⁷ His visits to places and meeting for inauguration of community libraries and reading rooms turned into public recruitment sessions of constructive workers to CSP.¹⁵⁸ Consequently, later these libraries and reading rooms became chief indoctrination and recruitment ground for CSP.¹⁵⁹ Chittagong branch of CSP was founded by Suresh Chandra Banerji in association of Sukhendu Bikash Datta. He inaugurated a CSP branch in Noakhali also in association with Khitish Chandra Roychowhury, an ex detenu belonged to *Jugantar* group. Roychowdhury

had been president at annual conference of All Bengal Railway Employees Association which in turn had close association with members of Tippera *Anushilan* and notorious labor agitators like Shibnath Banerji, A.M.A. Zaman and Sudhindra Pramanik.¹⁶⁰

In 1932, Bengal Labor Association (BLA) was formed by labor organizers of the *Abhay Ashram*. These organizers were mainly followers of Suresh Chandra Banerji who became indoctrinated with his recent ideological turn but they remained under the larger aegis of All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). Since the inception of AITUC in 1920, Gandhi never kept any close link with it, despite the fact that from time and again till 1934, Lala Lajpat Rai, Chitta Ranjan Das, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose became president of AITUC.¹⁶¹ Gandhi did not encourage his followers to build up working class bases.¹⁶² It was only in 3rd conference at Hudli of Gandhi *Seva Sangh*, a committee was formed, as a mediating machinery of arbitration in labor disputes to counter Communist labor organizers.¹⁶³ The *Abhay Ashram* labor organizers, however, had rarely anything in common with Gandhi's thoughts regarding the labor question and had much in common with communist labor organizers of Calcutta jute mills. The only difference they had, unlike communist organizers, they strove for a quicker solution and used Gandhian method for this.¹⁶⁴ The Labor strike at Metiburuz was one of BLA's most successful strike series and they eventually became involved in motor union activities as well.¹⁶⁵ Suresh Chandra Banerji by 1938 became president of AITUC and being the chief organizer of Bengal Labor Association, was appointed as the labor representative in Bengal Legislative Assembly.

One thing to be mentioned here is that Suresh Chandra Banerji himself did not always go along his sharp ideological line as well. In one speech, he valorized Indian joint family system for its principle of common ownership of property and compared this with Communist State's ideals. This system of common ownership of property, according to him, had founded the core of India's village community life.¹⁶⁶ The joint family system had been romanticized by nationalists of the late nineteenth century as the last true repository of India's true spirit.¹⁶⁷ The community life of Indian village society started receiving appreciation with the turn of the century and the *Abhay Ashram's* organizational structure facilitated representation of that ideal. Thus, though ideologically a socialist, Suresh Chandra Banerji's stand pertaining

nationalist concepts remained ambivalent throughout. Even his band of ‘professional revolutionaries’ and Gandhi’s band of ‘professional *Satyagrahis*’ shared the same view regarding the end result e.g. eradication of mass poverty. Therefore, the line was not rigidly demarcated, and in fact the differences were often rather fuzzy. However, when Subhas Chandra Bose resigned from Congress’ presidential post and formed Forward Block as a left ideology oriented group within Congress whose aims would be to change gradually its ideological thrust area and line of action,¹⁶⁸ being a die-hard supporter of Bose, Banerji left CSP and joined Forward Block. He left CSP and denounced congress for Bose’s resignation which was supported by *Seva Sangh* members.¹⁶⁹ *Abhay Ashram* labor organizers had never been in cordial ties with Gandhian line of labor question and its upholder organization, the Gandhi *Seva Sangh*. Thus after this incidence, their path became more diverged. Now the split at *Abhay Ashram*’s leadership rank became permanent because on one hand, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh remained a spokesperson of Gandhian faction’s interest in Bengal along with an executive membership in AIVIA and *Seva Sangh* simultaneously,¹⁷⁰ and on the other hand, there was the ideologically and politically diverted Suresh Chandra Banerji.

4.4 Relationship Between the two Organizations

Their relationship had not always been cordial either. Each organization had a different spirit and worked according to it. Especially, in the initial stage, the *Pratishthan* basically evolved around the strong personality of its founder and its community life was regulated by a strict discipline modeled on Gandhi’s Sabarmati *Ashram*. The *Abhay Ashram*, on the contrary was an outcome of a long tradition of Bengal where discipline and industry were components of a personal worship and sacrifice. Therefore while for the Ashram these two were directly linked with the political dimension and the ideal of national independence through constructive regeneration and social service, the main aim of the *Pratishthan* was the eradication of poverty and malnutrition by teaching self-sufficiency and self-control. Moreover, following philanthropic business-like footsteps of its fountain head, AISA, the *Pratishthan* worked for many years as technical lab and an organizing center for *Khadi* handicraft and was closely in touch with other simi-

lar institutions scattered across India. It was only in 1930's that it became a full-fledged self-supporting community center, where other aspects of the constructive program were eventually practiced. The *Abhay Ashram* however had always been a collective of ascetic activists since its very inception. It had first concentrated on its inner development and the establishment of a few centers in the immediate surroundings and only later gradually acquired a regional dimension.

In this period of expansion, a natural rivalry emerged between these two regarding demarcation of influence zones in order to avoid competition. The production and sale agencies opened by the *Khadi Pratishthan* in the eastern districts at Noakhali, Chittagong, Dacca and several other villages were not welcomed by the *Abhay Ashram* workers. The same happened to the latter's branches in the western districts, for instance at Bankura, where Nripenda Nath Basu's nephews, Sushil and Jagadis Palit founded a school for untouchables and an orphanage in 1927, or at Midnapore, where a *Khadi* shop was opened in the town's main *bazaar*.¹⁷¹ But besides this, already a subterranean vein of discontent was at work in the *Abhay Ashram*. At one stage, Suresh Chandra Banerji, Nripendra Nath Basu and Ananda Prasad Chaudhuri felt that they would better leave the Comilla *Ashram* to their opponent faction led by Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, and start afresh with a new center in Gopalganj, a *Namashudra* majority area. A merger of the *Khadi Pratishthan* with all constructive associations in Bengal was proposed for strengthening the movement through a centralized organization. Suresh Chandra Banerji, however, as soon as he learnt of the plan, stressed that the *Abhay Ashram* had been the first institution of Bengal to accept Gandhi's program, and that there was no question of dismantling it, let alone by such a different institution as the *Khadi Pratishthan*. In the end, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh resigned his *Abhay Ashram* membership, and a few centers, including that of his native village Malikanda, followed him in joining the *Pratishthan*.¹⁷² Prafulla Chandra Ghosh's resignation from the *Abhay Ashram* worked as the final death knell of their already rotten relationship. Gandhi attempted to arbitrate and bring them close several times before their permanent split. The inauguration of an industrial exhibition by Gandhi, on 2nd May, 1925, was attended both by Sodepur *Khadi Pratishthan* and Comilla *Abhay Ashram* on Gandhi's request.¹⁷³

Satish Chandra Dasgupta was given further responsibility as Bengal member in the AISA governing

body in 1925–26 and he took charge of *Khadi* production and sales over the province. This was the same role that Dr. Prafulla Chandra Ray had for a few months in 1924 as the President of the Bengal *Khadi* Board.¹⁷⁴ He was also responsible for the granting and managing of AISA's loans to local institutions, including the *Abhay Ashram*. On some occasions, Suresh Chandra Banerji's co-workers complained that they had been discriminated against by him, and as a mark of protest, for a while they applied for funds from banks.¹⁷⁵ Another bone of contention was the price of *Khadi* in Bengal. The *Abhay Ashram* members accused Satish Chandra Dasgupta of damaging the hand-spun cloth propaganda by selling it at very high prices, while Satish Chandra Dasgupta claimed that production and distribution could not be sustained without improving the quality, which in turn required higher selling prices to cover at least part of the expenses. Gandhi, though always tried to work as an arbitrator in these disputes, sided this time with Satish Chandra Dasgupta's argument.¹⁷⁶ When the experiment in "*Samyukta Khadi Biponi*" (coordinated sale of *Khadi*) was launched by the *Khadi Pratishthan* in 1929, the *Abhay Ashram* decided not to join. Gandhi, who considered the *Khadi Pratishthan* and the *Abhay Ashram* as the standard bearers of *Khadi* propaganda in Bengal, once again preached unity and cooperation.¹⁷⁷ Finally in 1926, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh left the *Khadi Pratishthan* due to disagreements with Satish Chandra Dasgupta. Then came the Civil Disobedience campaign, and the dispute was naturally set aside in the preparation and repercussion of the upcoming national regeneration movement. The flame of contrast, however, had not been extinguished, and ignited again in 1935, when Satish Chandra Dasgupta and Annada Prasad Chaudhuri sat before the AISA court in a case of funds mismanagement. More disputes arose between 1939 and 1941.

4.5 Conclusion

During 1942 and the subsequent years, though two of these institutions remained in existence, they gradually lost their importance because with India's impending independence, heavy industries had taken up the central position for economic development. 1942 was a turning point too not only in nation's history but also in Gandhi's philosophical development. The post 1942 experiences and events pushed him to such

a void of darkness that he in many instances had to reconsider his previously accepted ideas with radical alteration. These years had witnessed the utter marginalization of *Khadi* and Constructive Work program of these two institutions that continued in a more rapid pace even in independent India. The fact that the Constructive Work program associated with conventional politics from time to time also caused this decline because since Civil Disobedience movement, Congress had already lost its validity in rural parts of eastern Bengal as a better political alternative. A relative aloofness from constitutional politics could have saved its real purpose of work. The *Khadi Pratishthan* lost many of its sales depots and branches in Eastern Pakistan and *Abhay Ashram's* property had been confiscated by Pakistan's government. In the 1950's, the land around the *Pratishthan* was sold in order to meet debts. The purchaser, the government of West Bengal, led by Dr. B. C. Roy, used it for a housing project. After an attempt of financial recovery failed in 1963, debts and internal quarrel brought all philanthropic initiatives to a virtual standstill by early 1990s. The production of most *Khadi* products has stopped after 2001, though sarees and carpets were made till 2008. The present caretaker of the *Pratishthan* is Chetan Ravi Vyas, a *Harijan* by caste and once a close associate of Dasgupta's son.¹⁷⁸ The two surviving centers of *Abhay Ashram* are at Birati and Kharagpur. Among these two, the Birati center is at the verge of extinction. The Balarampur *Ashram* at Kharagpur, established near the *Buniyadi Siksha* school of Labanyalata Chanda, runs departments of textile handicraft, food manufacture, animal husbandry and agriculture.

The year 1942 was watershed in another sense for Communists organizers as well. The Bengal famine of 1942–43 brought them a chance to work and organize at village level and their entry at such grass root level altered many things in subsequent years in Bengal's country side.¹⁷⁹ Regeneration of rural life through Gandhi's constructive work organizations thus received such a radically different alternative way which not only gained rural support in few regions but also challenged the legitimacy of constructive work for rural rejuvenation. In fact during the turbulent decade of 1940's, some Constructive Work organizations diverged from their original goals and turned towards a Communist line of action for rural uplift, propaganda and organization. The curious case of Midnapore's *Shilpasram* is an ideal example in this context.

As a mass political organization and viable alternative of authority, the Congress had certainly lost its political footing in Bengal due to peculiar rural socio-economic contexts, which were deeply entrenched in province's past and political miscalculations. The political setbacks through the 1930's were greatly reflected in Bengal's provincial electoral result of 1937 and subsequent elections of 1940's. Their dismal electoral performance proved that Congress, which once had claimed authority over the masses in Bengal, had now completely alienated them. Civil Disobedience movement was its definite benchmark. However it was during this movement that Gandhi enunciated and put into active practice his philosophy for Civil Disobedience and Constructive Work. The movement made Gandhi to reorient his principles of Constructive Work to contextualize it in a broader moral framework. And following this new orientation and the establishment of new national level organizations in accordance with that line, the theory and practice episteme of provincial organizations were also altered. Hindrances posed by rural socio-economic pre-modern identity oriented politics remained and further deepened during later decade. But these Constructive Work organizations of *mufassil* and rural Bengal, were the last organizations that could uphold Congress' claim to organizational capability till the late 1930's. Their typical adoration for provincial individuality and constant close interaction with that made them different from city-based conventional politicians. Though they mostly worked in an authoritative hierarchic way, but they still worked as Gandhi's ideal bridge, and became the last fortress of Congress' political prestige in this province.

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Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis tried to demonstrate how Bengal's late nineteenth and early twentieth century philosophy provided the basis of an ideological precursor for future followers of Gandhi. Gandhi in many ways remained fundamental in presenting his theoretical arguments, but being a pragmatic thinker, unlike his late nineteenth century Bengali counterparts, he had never been the exceptional one. Thus when Gandhi came to the prominence of national forefront, in Bengal, the acceptance of his theory and practice for mass movement received a synchronized model. In this assimilated structure of means and ends, both the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anti-colonial philosophical sentiments and Gandhi's philosophy of action retained their individuality with sporadic synthesis. This convergence between Bankim's *Anushilan* and *Nishkam Karma*, Vivekananda's *Daridra Narayan* and Gandhi's *Ahimsa*, *Satyagraha* and Constructive work produced a movement of unprecedented individuality and generated a unique identity for Bengali followers of Gandhi. In practical work sphere, the towering stature of Self-Help during the days of Hindu *Mela* and *Swadeshi* movement provided the unparalleled impetus for Gandhi's grandiose Constructive Work Program in the 1920's and 1930's. In fact, his Constructive Work program was effectively the third emerging moment of Self-Help in Bengal. Bengal's glorious and sometimes mythic past of a vibrant handloom industry, late nineteenth century' pulse of the argument for Drain Theory, also rendered a legacy for Gandhi's *Khadi* program.

Calcutta and its *bhadralok* community receive much of the attention for colonial studies and historical analysis in India's context. This city and its conventional players of the high politics always had a love-hate relation with Gandhi. His approaches and symbolic mediums were too often received with caustic remarks for being benignly moral in harsh and uncertain contexts. C. R. Das was probably the first and last politician in Bengal who tried to forge a link between the city and its hinterlands. His untimely demise initiated the gradual disintegration process¹ of typical Bengali nationalism due to the emergence of diverging identity lines in Bengal's countryside of pre-colonial times. This process, often neglected by city elites, ultimately resulted in the weakening of Congress's organizational and political position in the province. Started from mid-1920's, this gradual decline was further propelled by the Civil Disobedience movement. Disintegration of rural community life due to the oppressive administrative and economic policies of the colonizers was one of the authentic markers of Bengal's late nineteenth-century anti-colonial

and early twentieth-century nationalist sentiments. This further and more deeply entrenched disintegration process of 1920's and 1930's in Bengal's countryside was addressed by Gandhi's followers and their Constructive Work organizations. Often neglected in Calcutta circle, some of them remained authentic in ideological terms but certainly maintained their autonomous Bengali identity while many of them plunged into the calculative decision making process of high politics. Their frequent association with mainstream politics too often made them suspicious elements in the eyes of rural people to whom Congress became a corrupt organization of Calcutta *bhadraloks* and their rural associates, namely, oppressive upper caste landholders. This created obstacles in the path of their main motive despite of having truest intention of an all-around moral and socio-economic upliftment.

The appalling organizational performance of Congress in Bengal during Civil Disobedience movement led to the reorientation of these Constructive Workers and their organizations. Mainstream politicians of Calcutta by then had distanced themselves from Central command of Congress because of diverging interests. However, as the work motives of Constructive Workers differed from these politicians, they subsequently linked themselves with Gandhi's centralized and national level organizations, namely, AISA and AIVIA for *Khadi* and Constructive work program. This step by Gandhi's followers helped Congress in turn to keep alive its rural fame for a while, even after the disastrous performance of Civil Disobedience movement. The national level Constructive Work organizations had a decentralized organizational work approach but unfortunately, following the ideals of strict disciplines of *Satyagraha*, Gandhi's ideological principles for Constructive Work carried the legacy of a top down approach. This often neglected provincial sensibilities and Bengal was not an exception in this case. The gradual convergence of these various local level organizations and their organizers with their respective local contexts and hindrances in many ways led them away from Gandhi's authentic line of action. This ultimately resulted in a total collapse of these Constructive Work organizations which in turn rendered Congress completely obscure as a viable political alternative in Bengal by late 1930's.

Independence in 1947 provided a litmus test for Gandhi's Constructive Work program or Self-Help scheme based on a true revival of *Khadi* and other village industries and regeneration of decentralized village community life. In December, 1947 the Congress government convened the Industrial Conference which devoted considerable attention to the problems of revival and development of cottage and small industries. This conference put forward three broad policy measures: (i) Establishment of national level organizations to coordinate policies, development programs and promotional measures for the sector; (ii) Initiate a regime of preferential treatment of small scale firms with regard to factor inputs; and (iii) Establishment of certain institutes and agencies like Cooperative Banks and marketing organizations to serve the needs of small scale and cottage industries. These recommendations were accepted by the government and incorporated as a part of the Industrial Policy Resolution of 1948.

However, Nehru's scientific temper for progress and modernization unleashed an all-around plan for industrialization.² He stated that an economy based on cottage and small scale industries was 'doomed to failure' because it could only 'fit in the world framework' as a 'colonial appendage'.³ A few years before independence, a group of politically minded industrialists had created an outline of the kind of economic policy they thought the state should follow after independence. It was popularly known as the 'Bombay Plan' (1944). They supported the idea that the state should play

a significant role in running industries which capitalists could not support and provide economic infrastructure.⁴ This provided the future basis for Nehruvian 'mixed economy', with economic activity left largely to private enterprise where state was given large regulatory powers.⁵ While Gandhi advocated the need for reviving the essential spirit of village life and never asked a total disintegration of Zamindari system, Nehru wanted to transform the village social and economic structure by using modern technology and changing agrarian relations. The policies of land reforms including abolition of Zamindari system introduced after independence were a direct translation of such thinking.⁶

However, Nehru did not totally lose hopes for cottage industries and advocated an adjustment of the two forms of production and economy where obviously *Khadi* and village industries were given a complementary role.⁷ First three five years plan during his lifetime gave substantial attention for Village and Cottage industries. The third Plan has allotted Rs. 92 crores for the development of *Khadi* and village industries as against Rs. 82 crores in the second plan. As a consequence of the Karve Committee during his regime in 1955, The *Khadi* and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) was established as a statutory body by an act of parliament in 1956. Its social objective of providing employment, economic objective of producing saleable articles and wider objective of creating self-reliance amongst the poor and building up of a strong rural community spirit reflect similar functional prospectus of AISA and AIVIA. After the formation, KVIC was made part of the Five-Year Plan process. Provincial level *Khadi* Gramodyog Bhavans are directly linked with it. Today, Kolkata has total eight such shops specialized not only in *Khadi* goods but also in other handlooms and village industrial products. Industrial policy resolution of 1977, 1980, 1990 and 1991, Comprehensive Policy Package for small scale and tiny sector (2000) And Industrial Policy Packages for small scale industries (2001-02 and 2005-06) have given further impetus for a revamp. In May, 2006, the President has amended the Government of India's 'Allocation of Business' Rules, 1961. Ministry of Agro and Rural Industries and Ministry of Small Scale Industries have been merged into a single Ministry, namely, the 'Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises' (MSME). In 2013 KVIC issued a notification that any textile sold as *Khadi* had to have KVIC's '*Khadi* Mark' certification. Following this, KVIC has sent a legal notice to Fabindia in 2017 to cease selling its garments as authentic *Khadi* products.⁸ In 2015, The MSME ministry has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Rural Self Employment Training Institutes, an initiative of the rural development ministry, to start rural incubation centers across India that will provide training and employment in *Khadi* related industries. *Yoga guru* Ramdev's bid to take over the government's *Khadi* sector in 2015 was rejected by center politely because the central government refused to give his Haridwar-based Patanjali *Yogpeeth* the complete responsibility of research, marketing, quality control and management. Instead, the government has decided to revamp the *Khadi* industry itself, by putting "best systems in place."⁹ The government has also decided to improvise the charkha design by making it a pedal powered machine to increase its productivity.¹⁰ KVIC's latest technological scheme of Solar Charkha during the financial year of 2019-2020¹¹ gives ample evidence that *Khadi* and its associated industries still bears the legacy of India's independence movement and Gandhi's Constructive Work program. Thus despite many caustic remarks and financial hindrances, production of *Khadi* and associated village industries have remained priority elements in government's subsidy list.

However these apparent periodic revamps are not always successful and there are instances when government's policies have troubled this sector. The National Textile Policy (1985–1986) during Rajiv Gandhi's regime marked a germinating moment for mild liberalization process. This signaled the end of employment protection in vulnerable handloom sector by removing hitherto existing restrictions on the mills and power looms.¹² In May 1996, the newly elected Bharatiya Janata Party toyed with the idea of ending state subsidies for *Khadi*, which had been guaranteed for nearly fifty years. After news was leaked to the press, the proposal met immediate and significant public opposition; protesters converged upon the parliamentary buildings in New Delhi to vent their anger. As a result, the government reconsidered and eventually dropped the plan.¹³

Today, *Khadi* still enjoys big rebates, for example in the highly subsidized rates for cotton, but its products are still 60% more expensive than mill cloth. The standard response to this high cost is that it includes the cost of fair returns to manual spinners and weavers, but the report pointed out that KVIC supported less than 3 lakhs people and, "what is worse, the wages are so low that spinners and weavers can hardly make both ends meet."¹⁴ Gandhi once dreamt of a state subsidized *Khadi* and village industries production and organizational work. After independence *Khadi* clothing became identified with corrupt Congress politicians who wore high-count, high-quality *Khadi* that lay beyond the means of the majority of India's population.¹⁵ The complain of false *Khadi* which had been a matter of concern for its nationalist brand name during the days of Gandhi have remained so after the independence also. In November 1978, it was J. B. Kripalani, one of Gandhi's few associates still alive then, who blessed a drive against dubious sounding 'polyester *Khadi*'.¹⁶ Today, *Khadi* also serves as a kind of "authentic chic" for a cosmopolitan Indian community that moves between London, New York, Sydney, and Hong Kong as much as between Delhi, Bangalore, and Bombay. In 2003, a collection was launched in South Africa dubbed as 'Afri *Khadi*' for catering a global customer base. But as with all the design initiatives and attempts to market through modern stores like Shoppers Stop, Spencer's and brands like Peter England of Aditya Birla's group,¹⁷ KVIC's efforts have slipped back into the usual inefficiency and unwanted production.

Khadi and Village industries which had been once perceived by Gandhi and his Constructive Workers as the ideal turning point of rural regeneration both socially and economically, was able to retain few of its original objectives during Nehruvian 'mixed economy'. As Nehru's primary economic goals were directed towards an agenda of eradication of poverty and elevating unemployment issue, the *Khadi* and other village industries work propagated by Gandhi, which were mostly consistent with such objectives, received a space for complimentary adjustment in broader economic framework. But today, these products unfortunately have become mere carriers of past nationalist sentiments.

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