

Freedom Movement: Textile Practices and the Making of a Nation

At the turn of the 20th century, textile traditions became deeply intertwined with India's freedom movement. India's first forms of civil disobedience and expressions of dissent in relation to colonialism were closely linked with Indigo and Khadi, the country's handspun and handwoven cotton fabric.

Dyes of Dissent

Let's first look at how exploitative practices in indigo production led to one of India's first organised resistances. The country's warm climate was uniquely suitable for growing indigo. Owing to its vast popularity across the world, British landlords and planters in India profited immensely from exporting the brilliant blue dye that this plant produced.

A consequence of this prosperous trade was the widespread oppression of indigo farmers throughout the 19th century. To maximise production, the colonisers imposed long working hours, brutal land laws and high fees and taxes, entrapping farmers in a vicious cycle of debt and forced labour. The grim reality of these working conditions are captured in these images.

As you can see, British officers strictly supervised the farmers, making them perform to their maximum capacity. The excessive farming of cash crops like indigo and opium, leached fertile soils of their essential nutrients, and prevented them from producing food crops. This contributed significantly to the widespread famines in Bengal, Bihar and Madras through the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The brutal conditions of farmers led to various resistance movements in India, most prominently, the Blue Mutiny, a yearlong revolt that took place in Bengal in 1859, and later, the Champaran Resistance in 1917, which had far-reaching consequences in India's struggle for independence.

In Champaran, a district in Bihar, a group of desperate farmers turned to Gandhi for help in improving their oppressive circumstances. Gandhi, then a young lawyer who had recently returned from South Africa, intervened by facilitating a public outcry. The Champaran revolt was accomplished by lawfully dissenting against colonial authorities and educating farmers of their civil rights. This was an initial materialisation of Gandhi's revolutionary philosophy of Satyagraha, or nonviolent resistance, that led to India's eventual freedom in 1947.

Fabric of Freedom

Let's now turn our attention to Khadi, India's handspun and handwoven cotton fabric, which was at the heart of the Swadeshi Movement, another key arm in Gandhi's independence philosophy. This movement encouraged the production and consumption of Indian commodities, particularly textiles, and the boycott of British imports.

While the movement did garner overwhelming support from Indian people, some women leaders of the independence movement were opposed to using white khadi due to the colour's association with notions of widowhood and female purity. Nevertheless, khadi soon transformed from a fabric into a way of life, symbolic of India's self-reliance and economic independence.

As a result of the Khadi movement, textile production in India, which was typically caste based, was democratised. All members of society, despite their religion, caste or gender started engaging in spinning and weaving. Alongside the fabric, the charkha, or spinning wheel, became synonymous with the nationalist movement and India's independence. In fact, in 1931, the Indian National Congress officially adopted a flag portraying a charkha, as you can see here.

The protests and dissent surrounding indigo production and the Khadi movement contributed to the rising consciousness against the colonial regime, compelling the emergence and persistence of a new national identity. The natural blue dye, coarse khadi fabric and the charkha are enduring symbols of resistance, sovereignty and Indian patriotism.

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