



Kautilya Fellows 2025-26

OCCASIONAL PAPERS

Clothing, Identity, Resistance towards the British

*Women's Dress in the Indian Independence
Movement*

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October 2026

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Executive Summary

Women's clothing and its role in resistance towards the West has had various examples across Asia, from the Japanese women's resistance towards the Americans during the Meiji era (1868-1912) to the Indian Independence Movement from the British Raj (1885-1947). In India, however, clothing functioned as a cultural and political battleground. This research examines clothing as a mediating cultural form through which gender norms and national identity were negotiated; hence, it does not treat clothing as a direct driver of political change. According to Partha Chatterjee, the nation's "inner" spiritual domain is a space for preserving cultural authenticity amid modernization. In this view, the research focuses on *khadi* and its political and symbolic role. This observation is done by further exploring how nationalist discourse positioned women into this framework. Now, the question is: How did women's clothing function as a cultural and political battleground within the Independence Movement? From the methodological aspect, the research utilizes qualitative analysis of nationalist writings; also, particular attention is given to differences across social strata, e.g., comparing elite nationalist perspectives with voices from Dalit and Muslim contexts. Via the lens of the analytical-descriptive frame, the research concludes that women's national clothing during the Independence Movement functioned as one of the strongest symbols of resistance against the British Raj; at the same time, it also helped regulate social norms and shaping nationalist modernity.

01 Introduction

CLOTHING IS CONSIDERED A POWERFUL SYMBOL in anti-colonial movements. In colonial India, textiles were closely associated with imperial economic domination; this was particularly done via the displacement of indigenous production by British industrial cloth. In this context, hand-spun *khadi*¹ and "traditional" women's clothing gained significant political significance. This research delves into how *dress* became a *mediating* cultural form within nationalist politics. While women's sartorial practices varied across regions, religions, and castes, this research focuses centrally on *khadi* as the key case study. It will hence be via *khadi* that broader questions of gendered nationalism can be examined.

A propos *khadi*, it does not stand in for all women's dress; more precisely, it serves as a particularly visible and ideologically intersection point where politics, economy and morality meet. According to Partha Chatterjee's argument in *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), Indian nationalism divided the world into an outer/material domain² and an inner/spiritual domain³. While the outer domain could adopt Western techniques, the inner domain had to preserve

¹a hand-spun and handwoven cloth made from natural fibers, promoted by Mahatma Gandhi as part of the *swadeshi* (self-reliance) movement during India's freedom struggle, and widely used across the Indian subcontinent. (Pal, 2017)

²e.g., politics, economy, statecraft

³e.g., home, culture, womanhood

authentic national culture. This reason is why women became symbolic guardians of this inner sphere. Their clothing was not incidental; it became one of the most visible markers of national identity par excellence. The "new woman" had two sides of the same coin; for instance, she was educated while being modest, and politically aware while morally restrained. Clothing was central to this reconfiguration.

Now, this question can be raised: were women shaping sartorial nationalism (as active agents), or were they being shaped by it (passive agents)? According to Tanika Sarkar, nationalist discourse often intensified expectations of female purity and sacrifice. The adoption of khadi, for instance, symbolized simplicity and moral discipline; however, at the same time it also carried prescriptive implications regarding women's labor. In this view, khadi must be approached critically. Mahatma Gandhi framed khadi as the ethical fabric of the nation — a symbol of self-reliance and dignity. His own minimal attire functioned as a deliberate political language by signalling solidarity with rural poverty and critique of industrial capitalism. In this view, scholars such as Judith Brown and Faisal Devji have shown that Gandhian politics was also profoundly ethical and disciplinary. Within this context, this article asks the main question on how women's clothing functioned as a contested cultural and political site within the Indian Independence Movement.

02 Theoretical Framework

This research is located at the intersection of feminist history and postcolonial theory. As mentioned before, Partha Chatterjee adopts the distinction between inner and outer domains of nationalism. By looking at Anne McClintock's insight that nations are frequently figured through the iconography of the female body (Imperial Leather, 1995), the research treats women's dress as a literal embodiment of national identity and resistance towards the West, i.e., the British Raj. Moreover, Mrinalini Sinha (1995) takes seriously the *gendered* dimension of colonial power, particularly how colonial discourse reshaped both masculinity and femininity, thereby influencing nationalist gender norms. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid adopt the understanding that modern Indian womanhood was not static but historically constructed through reformist, nationalist, but also, colonial negotiations. Overall, this scholarship prevents the research from romanticizing women's dress as straightforward resistance; instead, it situates sartorial politics within various structures, i.e., such as of gender, caste and religion. At the same time, it analytically centers khadi as a particularly revealing site of these negotiations.

03 Methodology

This research adopts qualitative research and textual analysis of both, prescriptive nationalist discourse and women's self-representations. The research will analyse writings and speeches by

Mahatma Gandhi on khadi and women to reconstruct the normative framework through which dress was politicized and moralized. To address the question of women's agency, oeuvres of nationalist women from different social locations and contemporary debates will be observed as well. Particular attention will be given to how they described spinning and wearing khadi.

The above-mentioned sources will be complemented by articles in nationalist literature to trace how women's dress was publicly discussed. Wherever possible, the research will compare elite urban nationalist women's writings with narratives extracted from marginalized communities, in particular, Dalit and Muslim contexts. This observation is precisely done in order to assess whether khadi carried *uniform* political meaning or was differently reinterpreted in various groups. While the availability of sources may shape the final balance, this comparative attention is intended to avoid treating "Indian women" as a homogeneous category. Through this combination of prescriptive texts and women's own narratives, the research aims to assess not only how women were symbolically positioned within nationalist discourse, but also how they actively engaged with, negotiated, and, sometimes reshaped the political meanings of dress.

04 Khadi⁴ Movement

One of the most important elements impacting the constructions of identities, families, castes, classes, regions and the nation in colonial India is considered *clothing* (Tarlo, 1996; Cohn, 1996). According to Chris Bayly and Bernard Cohn, the power of cloth was inscribed with new meanings by nationalists and therefore, transformed into a relevant visual symbol of freedom struggle against the British Raj (Bayly, 2014; Cohn, 1998). New meanings were brought to swadeshi by Gandhi. According to Susan Bean, Khadi became the *fabric of Indian independence* (Bean, 1989 in Gupta, 2024).

Gianni Sofri argues that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's early experiences outside India, particularly in London, profoundly shaped his personal and intellectual transformation by describing them as a "tumultuous capital of a globalized world." In *Gandhi tra Oriente e Occidente*, Sofri mentions that Gandhi's adherence to certain practices — such as vegetarianism — initially stemmed more from family tradition, but that his time abroad prompted a profound rediscovery of his own *identity* as an Indian. This encounter with Western modernity, in Sofri's view, helped forge Gandhi's later synthesis of Eastern spiritual values and political strategies of resistance. In fact, all these reasons ultimately grounded his leadership in India's struggle for independence and shaping the ethical foundations of movements such as *swadeshi* and khadi. (Sofri, 2015)

The Khadi movement emerged as a central component of the Swadeshi campaign during the Indian independence struggle. Led by Mahatma Gandhi around 1918, it promoted hand-spun

⁴खादी

cloth as a symbol of self-reliance (*swadeshi*⁵), economic autonomy, and resistance to British industrial domination. Khadi literally means handspun and handwoven cloth. According to Gandhi's own words (Supraja, 2020), Khadi is defined as: "Hand-woven cloth made of hand-spun yarn is of course khadi, however fine it may be. It may be made of cotton, silk or even of wool. One should wear whichever of these ones happens to find convenient. The khadi from Andhra is very fine. In Assam, one can get some khadi made of silk. Woollen khadi is made in Kathiawar. In other words, the only criterion of khadi is its being hand-spun and hand-woven." (Gandhi, 1925, Vol. 28)

The Khadi movement was a prominent step in the bigger Swadeshi movement. As mentioned before, the year 1918 is considered a key year when Mahatma Gandhi used specifically khadi cloth as a key part of the Khadi Movement. The Swadeshi Movement was designed to boycott the use of British imported products and materials. Doing this would have benefited Hindustan in various ways, e.g., helping to lift the country out of poverty by creating industry and jobs locally, and freeing it from its reliance on expensive and imported goods originated from Britain, even though the raw materials had originated in India. Gandhi understood it was crucial for Indians to take back what was theirs. This goal was primarily feasible by the use of their own productions and skills to create their own wealth. Hence, khadi cloth became the heart of this strategy when Gandhi called out to every Indian man and woman to plant and harvest their own materials for the yarn needed to create Khadi fabric. He also asked everyone, whether rich or poor, to spend time each day spinning Khadi with *charkha*⁶. Mahatma Gandhi's country-wide initiative helped to bring unity through shared labour. More precisely, people of all classes came together to do as he asked for, and entire villages adopted the movement by weaving their way to economic freedom through fashion. (Supraja, 2020)

Everyday labor was transformed into a visible form of nationalist participation and ethical discipline by Gandhi's call for Indians to spin and wear khadi (Trivedi, 2007). Likewise, his adoption of increasingly simple attire functioned as a deliberate political language that reflected his critique of modern industrial civilization and colonial power (Guha, 2013; Devji, 2012).

05 Nationalist discourse

Apropos nationalist leader, they did not treat khadi as a neutral economic practice. By arguing that spinning and wearing khadi cultivated personal discipline and collective responsibility, Gandhi explicitly framed it as a moral and ethical cloth (Brown, 1972). In his speeches and writings, Gandhi repeatedly linked the act of spinning to moral regeneration; he considered it as a way to purify the self and resist colonial dependence. In this view, women were also encouraged

⁵स्वदेशी

⁶चरखा

to spin for economic and moral reasons, the latter one being their practice of self-discipline and contribution to collective liberation.

This moralization of dress was not limited to spinning alone. The act of wearing khadi became a visible declaration of political identity. More precisely, it portrayed devotion to swadeshi ideals and resistance to colonial authority. Nationalist discourse frequently demonstrated politically active women as expressions of moral virtue and national culture (Forbes, 1996).

Tanika Sarkar's oeuvre on cultural nationalism shows that gendered expectations were deeply rooted in Indian nationalist ideology. She argues that nationalist discourse in colonial India politicized women's roles and bodies. This discourse used ideals of domesticity and virtue to define cultural authenticity, in addition to legitimate the nationalist project (Sarkar, 2001). In this context, symbolic markers of femininity — including forms of dress and virtue — were enlisted to contrast Indian cultural identity with colonial representations of modernity and moral decline.

Anne McClintock (1995) provides a broader theoretical insight relevant here by arguing that nations are frequently imagined through gendered symbolism; in this regard, women's bodies represent cultural continuity. Within such symbolic frameworks, material practice, e.g., forms of dress, can function as visible markers via which national identity is expressed.

Mrinalini Sinha (1995) similarly demonstrates that colonial gender discourse reshaped both masculinity and femininity. Within colonial narratives, Indian men were frequently feminized—particularly in representations of Bengali society—and portrayed as lacking the masculine qualities associated with political authority. On the other hand, Indian women were represented as subjects of cultural and social subjugation. While often maintaining social hierarchy, nationalist responses sought to reconstruct gender norms in ways that challenged colonial authority. Gendered cultural practices—including forms of dress—became visible arenas through which competing ideas of modernity and tradition were expressed. In this view, it was essential for the nationalist leaders to show *femininity* in a way being capable of enhancing the *masculine* side of Indian men. Thus, mythology, literature and history led to the creation of the concept of *femininity* in the *new woman* construct (Thapar, 1993).

06 Clothing as Cultural Negotiation Rather Than Political Determinism

Clothing helped translate abstract political ideas, such as swaraj, into everyday practices. Wearing khadi allowed individuals to express nationalism materially; however, power relations, e.g., elements such as gender, caste and religion influenced these practices. This explanation corresponds with broader postcolonial scholarship which emphasizes on the symbolic dimensions of nationalism.

In this view, Chatterjee (1993) argues that cultural practices often precede institutional political change by constructing shared identity frameworks within the nation's "inner domain." Feminist historiography further delves into this picture by showing that symbolic inclusion does not always translate into structural empowerment (Sangari & Vaid, 1989; Mani, 1998). While reinforcing normative constraints, women's clothing, such as khadi, could simultaneously enable participation in nationalist culture; thus, khadi should be understood neither as purely emancipatory nor purely disciplinary. Chatterjee's point of view is going to be explained further in the next section.

07 Women, the inner domain, and the "new woman"

One of the most important scholars to name apropos women's scholarship during the Indian Independence Movement is Partha Chatterjee. In fact, his theorization of nationalism helps identify why women's bodies and clothing became so symbolically significant. His argument assists understanding the symbolic role of women's clothing in Indian nationalism by mentioning that nationalist discourse divided the social world into two conceptual domains: the outer/material domain and the inner/spiritual domain (Chatterjee, 1993).

According to Chatterjee (1993), nationalist movements in colonized societies often conceptualized a protective cultural core, i.e., an "inner domain" that had to be safeguarded from colonial influence. Examples are agents like women themselves, and entities such as marriage, family, in addition to cultural practices which were casted as belonging to this inner domain. In the Indian context, women's dress—especially when framed as "traditional" or non-Western—was seen as a repository of cultural authenticity that colonial culture jeopardized. The same happened in Japan as well; women became successfully the preservers of the Japanese tradition using *kimono* in the face of the Western influence (Salimi, 2024). On the other hand, the outer domain included politics, administration, science, and economic organization—areas in which nationalist leaders acknowledged the *need* to adopt Western institutional models. As mentioned before, the inner domain, by contrast, was associated with elements, e.g., culture, religion, family life, and morality. This domain was constructed as the authentic core of the nation that needed protection from colonial influence. Women were positioned centrally within this inner domain. Because they were associated with domesticity and moral purity, they also became symbolic custodians of national culture. As a result, debates about women's clothing carried broader ideological significance.

By the early twentieth century, the construct of the "new woman" in India began to evolve in response to changing political conditions and the growing nationalist movement. Social reforms related to gender roles had already begun; in this view, Mahatma Gandhi's ideas were considered progressive for the period, and his rise in the 1920s profoundly shaped the discourse on women's participation in nationalist politics. He accepted gender-specific roles, but not in its entirety; for

instance, he strongly criticized practices that restricted women's autonomy, e.g., purdah, dowry, and the devadasi⁷ system. For Gandhi, women were central participants in the nationalist struggle. He believed women are particularly suited to movements grounded in non-violence and moral resistance due to their perceived qualities of self-sacrifice and endurance. Emphasizing the compatibility between women's moral strength and the principles of ahimsa⁸ and satyagraha⁹, he famously asserted that "if non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women" (Young India, 15.12.1921). These his statements showed his inclination towards women's mobilization; nevertheless, this tendency was accompanied with an emphasis on their participation within culturally familiar notions of femininity (Thapar, 1993).

The promotion of khadi through spinning and weaving was a key aspect of women's participation in the nationalist movement. As a form of economic resistance to the British colonial rule, Gandhi encouraged the boycott of foreign cloth and the production of indigenous textiles. As a result, the use of "charkha" became a key part of his Constructive Program and later, a national symbol. This is exactly where women's role in the nationalist movement becomes evident; the production of clothing for the household was traditionally associated with women's image in domestic duties. This is why "spinning" could be framed as part of women's dharma¹⁰ (i.e., moral obligation). Activists such as Saraladevi Sarabhai have interpreted women's involvement in the nationalist movement through this lens. According to her, women's participation shall be described as the fulfilment of religious and social duty (Agnew, 1979). Therefore, even without directly entering public political spaces, the practice of spinning enabled many women—particularly those bound by conservative domestic norms—to contribute to the movement (Thapar, 1993).

Nevertheless, during the 1930s, Gandhi increasingly encouraged women to move beyond the domestic sphere; participating in public demonstrations, e.g., picketing during the civil disobedience movement is an example in this regard. The importance of this act lies in the fact it disrupted earlier nationalist ideals emphasizing on the sacredness of the home as the proper domain of women. The moment women began to appear in public protests were crucial to activists. The reason was their anxiety on how to eventually distinguish themselves from those socially categorized as "women of the street." An example of this tension was the prohibition of prostitutes in Kanpur from joining civil disobedience demonstrations; they were further regarded as "unfit to sit near other ladies" by members of the District Congress Committee. Gandhi himself

⁷देवदासी: member of a community of women who dedicate themselves to the service of the patron god of the great temples in eastern and southern India. (Britannica)

⁸अहिंसा: Ahimsa, in the Indian religions of Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, the ethical principle of not causing harm to other living things. (Britannica)

⁹सत्याग्रह: Concept introduced by Mahatma Gandhi in the early 20th century to designate a determined but nonviolent resistance to evil. (Britannica)

¹⁰धर्म

refused to allow prostitutes into the Congress unless they abandoned their profession (Thapar, 1993).

A redefinition of the nationalist construct of the "new woman" seemed vital. Earlier representations seemed to be quite different from the revised model; the first emphasized on domestic virtue and moral purity, whereas the latter included qualities, e.g., courage, discipline, and resilience in the face of political struggle of the time. Societal expectations of women increased; they were expected to endure the hardships of nationalist activism. These hardships had two different sides, one being the imprisonment or absence of male family members, and the other being leadership roles assumption when necessary (Nehru, 1949). This "redefinition" allowed women to gradually integrate into nationalist politics; nevertheless, they were still being framed within gendered ideals of sacrifice and moral strength (Thapar, 1993).

Clothing was not merely considered aesthetic anymore; in contrast, it became a symbolic visual marker of cultural authenticity and national identity. This symbolism does not imply that clothing was a static tradition; instead, its dynamism was accurately used by nationalists to articulate a vision of Indian modernity that was culturally rooted and morally distinct from Western modernity. This is why clothing became an intersection place of cultural preservation and political resistance.

This symbolic positioning leading to the redefinition of gender norms has been explained by feminist historians; the explanations show that the reinterpretation of the above-mentioned norms was far more than a simple preservation of tradition. Sangari and Vaid (1989) argue that colonial modernity and nationalist reform movements jointly constructed a new model of Indian womanhood that combined education with modesty. This new model also led to the combination to the public participation with moral restraint. Hence, this "new woman" was neither fully traditional nor fully modern—it represented a "negotiated" cultural identity.

Similarly, according to Mani (1998), women were often central to nationalist debates over tradition — not because they were *active* participants in decision-making, but because their bodies and practices were symbolically leveraged in struggles over cultural authority and legitimacy. Several debates were used to articulate broader claims about authentic culture and social reform; examples are how tradition was defined, who had the authority to define it, and whose voices counted often excluded women's own perspectives.

08 Women's negotiation

Negotiating agency within nationalist frameworks

According to feminist historians such as Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, those portrayals often universalized women's experiences by ignoring the diversity of women's voices in the society of

Hindustan; hence, they do not agree with the nationalist portrayals of women. Moreover, Sangari and Vaid (1989), show that nationalist representations frequently idealized women as morally pure figures. According to them, though the expectation of the nationalist representations was a cultural authenticity expression, no guarantee was granted for an equal participation or voice in political leadership. Women were symbolically central, though still often institutionally marginalized.

Lata Mani (1998) similarly rejected the sidelining of women's actual agency in nationalist narratives. According to her, women were publicly visible as symbols of cultural rootedness; however, they were rarely consulted as autonomous political subjects in shaping nationalist strategies at that time. These dual pressures impacted how women experienced nationalist dress politics; more precisely, on one hand, the adoption of khadi could signify empowerment, though on the other hand, it could also reinforce normative expectations about concepts such as femininity, modesty, and also, domesticity.

Historians have shown that nationalist campaigns encouraged women to adopt khadi as a visible marker of political participation. Visual and textual sources clearly show that many women wore khadi in public nationalist settings to express commitment to the movement; in addition, many women also navigated emerging social expectations about appropriate nationalist dress (Trivedi, 2007).

Historical photographs and exhibition research show that many women participating in nationalist protests chose to wear khadi sarees to make their political commitment visible in public spaces. Clothing was not only practical but also *symbolic*. An example is women's appearance at rallies and pickets dressed in khadi. This act allowed them to represent themselves as part of the nationalist cause. Finally, women stepped into new public roles that challenged conventional expectations about women's presence in politics (Ganeshan, 2025).

Simultaneously, prescriptive expectations were not acceptable to all women because some of them regarded moral imperatives attached to khadi—such as its association with self-sacrifice and austerity—as restrictive. Women from wealthier families sometimes resisted adopting khadi because of class differences and differing visions of modernity— not out of loyalty to colonial norms.

Social differences: caste, religion, and regional experiences

According to Tanika Sarkar (2001), nationalist discourse often heightened expectations of female purity and sacrifice. Adopting khadi was both, a political choice and a moral performance; it clearly carried prescriptive implications about women's labor and visibility.

To illustrate how khadi and women's clothing operated as a contested terrain mentioned at the beginning of the article, it is instructive to examine specific case studies that reveal the intersection of gender with other elements such as caste, religion, and, regional identity.

In urban centers such as Bombay and Calcutta, women's engagement with nationalist dress assumed highly public forms. *Desh Sevika Sangh* is an organization par excellence which mobilized women for swadeshi work. The organization's work included spinning, boycotts, and also, public demonstration (Forbes, 1996). These women used khadi for mainly two goals: a sign of political marker and also, a visible sign of collective organization and discipline.

As nationalist women were called to weave their clothes and boycott British imports, Swadeshi clothing further created a feeling of solidarity among them (Thatcher Ulrich, 2001 in Gupta, 2024). Various songs were composed, with Grihalakshmi, the women's journal writing: (Gupta, 2024)

तजर्ये तो स्वदेशी बदन पर बसन हो, मारें अगर तो स्वदेशी कफ़न हो

[While we live our apparel be of swadeshi, when we die our shroud be of swadeshi.] (Grihalakshmi, 1921)

Marginalized communities: caste and religion

Dalit women's case study

Charu Gupta's work on caste highlights how lower-caste women experienced nationalist dress norms differently. Gupta (2004) shows that nationalist ideals of khadi often reflected upper-caste values and aesthetics by marginalizing or ignoring the sartorial practices of women from Dalit communities. For these women, wearing khadi could carry additional layers of social stigma linked to various elements, e.g., caste prejudice which complicated its political symbolism. Women's clothing became an important arena of political and cultural negotiation during the swadeshi and khadi movements in colonial North India. In her analysis of clothing politics in the United Provinces (present-day Uttar Pradesh), Charu Gupta argues that nationalist discourse did not simply encourage economic boycott of British textiles; it also attempted to reshape women's bodies, behaviour, and clothing in accordance with new ideals of Hindu nationalist respectability (Gupta, 2024).

However, Gupta emphasizes that the politics of khadi and swadeshi clothing were deeply shaped by caste ideology. Nationalist rhetoric often framed "proper" Hindu womanhood through clothing practices associated with upper-caste acceptability. Middle-class and upper-caste reformers promoted specific styles of dress that they believed embodied modesty, discipline, and cultural authenticity (Gupta, 2024). In this way, the nationalist project attempted to construct a standardized image of the Hindu woman through clothing, linking female virtue to the symbolic purity of the nation. Within this framework, the experiences of lower-caste and Dalit women reveal important tensions in nationalist dress politics.

According to Gupta, the nationalist emphasis on modest clothing was in part directed against the perceived cultural practices of lower-caste communities. Reformers and caste ideologues frequently portrayed Dalit women's clothing practices as markers of moral and social *inferiority*.

Consequently, nationalist discourse sought to "reform" these practices by encouraging the adoption of more modest and regulated forms of dress associated with upper-caste Hindu norms (Gupta, 2024).

For Dalit women, this process did not simply represent participation in nationalist resistance. Their process involved pressure to conform to caste-based notions of respectability; this point was why the adoption of khadi or swadeshi clothing could function as a mechanism of social control. The redefinition of caste identities and the further reinforcement of hierarchical social structures was what nationalist leaders attempted to eventually do. Hence, as part of this process, they encouraged lower-caste women to adopt clothing styles defined by upper-caste reformers (Gupta, 2024). Therefore, to regulate various elements, e.g., sexuality, morality, and social status, the desired reform became intertwined with broader attempts.

According to Gupta, clothing debates were often connected to anxieties about sexuality and caste boundaries. On one hand, upper-caste nationalist leaders frequently associated "respectable" clothing with modesty and moral purity, while on the other hand, they portrayed certain forms of lower-caste clothing as signs of immorality or social disorder. These narratives reinforced the idea that women's bodies regulation and clothing practices still influenced the nation's moral integrity (Gupta, 2024). Thus, the politics of swadeshi dress functioned as both sides of a coin—on one side, a strategy of anti-colonial resistance and on the other, a means of reinforcing social hierarchies within Indian society.

At the same time, apropos women's agency, they were not simply passive recipients of these prescriptive norms. In many contexts, women selectively adopted or adapted swadeshi clothing practices according to their own circumstances. Nationalist leaders attempted to standardize women's dress through ideological campaigns but still, actual practices differed across various regions, communities, and social classes (Gupta, 2024). Women's engagement with khadi reflected "negotiation" as the intersection point between nationalist expectations, local traditions, and personal agency.

Two powerful symbols of nationalist resistance were considered the Khadi and swadeshi clothing which were still not completely detached from the existing structures of caste and gender inequality. For Dalit and lower-caste women, nationalist clothing reforms were an example par excellence of both sides of the coin, i.e., an opportunity for participation in political movements, and pressures to conform to upper-caste ideals of respectability (Gupta, 2024). Swadeshi resulted in a fragmented modernity; for Dalit, modernity may even appear as its opposite, and hence, a section of converted Dalit adapted their material world of clothing to *fabricate* their identities, and clothing tied them to modernity. The converted Dalit figure was the "inappropriate other," an internal contradiction whose clothing style disrupted Swadeshi ideology. In literal terms, Dalit women and men wore their difference on their bodies which eventually equaled to an uncomfortable anomaly in the swadeshi discourse (Gupta, 2024).

Muslim women's case study

For Muslim women, the concept of nationalist dress norms was closely related to religious and cultural considerations. This is why in case of Muslim women, sometimes the approach led to selective adoption of the swadeshi clothing.

According to Minault (1998)—in her detailed study of Muslim social reform in colonial India—educational reform was not a singular male-driven understating. In contrast, it developed across the engagement of multiple generations. Later cohorts of educated women—sometimes called "daughters of reform"—used their education to articulate perspectives on issues, e.g., marriage and purdah¹¹. This approach reflects Muslim women's colonial and religious norms' orientation in complex and context-specific ways.

The political upheaval surrounding the 1905 Partition of Bengal and the emergence of the Swadeshi movement in the same year produced a variety of responses across colonial society, including amongst Bengali Muslim women. Although rather a marginalizing approach could be traced in the nationalist historiography regarding Muslim women's voices, their writings demonstrate that they engaged intellectually with the political and economic transformations of the period. Muslim women developed complex interpretations of the various concepts of nationalism, colonialism, and the Swadeshi movement. They did not act as passive observers of political change (Haidar, 2025).

It has often been portrayed that Muslim women in colonial Bengal were socially secluded and largely absent from the public sphere. Earlier literary histories focused primarily on Hindu and Brahmo women writers and overlooked Muslim women's literary contributions. There was an impression that Muslim women had little involvement in intellectual or political discourse in colonial Bengal (Haidar, 2025). Nevertheless, they did participate in contemporary debates and expressed their own perspectives on the political developments of the time (Haidar, 2025).

In response to the British colonial government's decision to partition Bengal in 1905, the Swadeshi movement emerged. The partition was considered part of the colonial "divide and rule" strategy which intended to weaken nationalist resistance. It was in reaction to this policy that nationalist leaders promoted the boycott of foreign goods and encouraged the use of indigenous products as a form of economic resistance as mentioned before. Therefore, many people followed the call and rejected imported commodities, including British textiles. The call got that widespread and serious that followers adopted locally manufactured alternatives even when they were less refined or more expensive (Chaudhuri, 2023, as cited in Haidar, 2025; Gandhi, 2009, as cited in Haidar, 2025). Nevertheless, although the movement initially generated a sense of unity among Hindus and Muslims, the increasing use of Hindu religious symbolism and slogans

¹¹The practice of women's seclusion from public observation amongst Muslims and some Hindus, especially in India (Merriam Webster dictionary)

negatively affected the unity process by eventually excluding many Muslims, and complicating their participation in the movement (Haidar, 2025).

This political context made several Bengali Muslim women respond to the Swadeshi movement with the use of poetry and essays. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (Begum Rokeya¹²) was one of those Bengali Muslim women whose writings reveal her interest in the anti-colonial struggle. One of her exemplary poems is *Nirupam Bir* ("Peerless Warrior"). Rokeya commemorates the revolutionary Kanailal Dutta in this poem. Dutta was executed by the British colonial government for his role in nationalist activities. Dutta's courage and heroic death portrayal in the struggle against colonial oppression is what the poem is about. This poem is proof of Rokeya's admiration for anti-colonial resistance and acknowledgement for the symbolic importance of sacrifice in nationalist politics. According to her, the revolutionary's sacrifice would ensure his lasting place in the collective memory of India (Hossain, 2019, as cited in Haidar, 2025).

Another significant perspective can be observed in the writings of Khairunnesa Khatun. In her case, an economic justification for supporting the Swadeshi movement is demonstrated. In her essay *For the Love of Motherland* Khairunnesa advances a critique of colonial economic exploitation and advocates the consumption of indigenous goods. According to her, India possessed sufficient resources to sustain its own economy and hence, should not rely on imported commodities. The continued use of foreign goods, in her view, allowed colonial powers to extract wealth from India which ended up in the reinforcement of colonial economic domination (Khatun, 2008, as cited in Haidar, 2025). She encouraged the reconsideration of Indians' consumption habits and promoted the use of locally produced alternatives, e.g., cow's milk instead of imported tinned milk, and traditional brass or copper utensils instead of foreign enamelled wares. The adoption of indigenous goods was considered both, a patriotic duty, and a practical economic strategy intended to preserve national wealth.

Khairunnesa's discussion also reflects an awareness of the broader economic structures of colonial exploitation. She illustrated how colonial trade networks facilitated the transfer of wealth from India to Britain by emphasizing the financial burden created by imported commodities, e.g., sugar and tobacco. Therefore, her call for the increased use of locally produced goods aligned with nationalist economic critiques that highlighted the "drain of wealth" from colonial economies (Haidar, 2025).

Despite these supportive interpretations, Muslim women did not show a homogeneous response to the Swadeshi movement. Critical reflections on the movement's social consequences appeared in other contemporary writings as well. An example in this view is Razia Khatun Chowdhurani's oeuvre. Her short story *The Laborer* presents a sceptical view of the effects of nationalist activism on ordinary people which she boldly criticizes. The story is about a laborer who is pressured by nationalist activists to resign from his job under the colonial government. The reason was since

¹²বেগম রোকেয়া (in Bengali script)

such employment was considered incompatible with Swadeshi ideology. His resignation makes him lose his livelihood and his family gradually descends into extreme poverty; the zenith of the story is when eventually one of his children dies from starvation (Chowdhurani, 2008, as cited in Haidar, 2025).

Razia tends to highlight the contradictions and social consequences of nationalist politics in *The Labourer* when ideological commitments are imposed without regard for economic realities. She is critique towards those activists who demand strict adherence to Swadeshi principles without considering in realistic terms the suffering of the poor; this her portrayal challenges the idealized representation of the movement (Haidar, 2025).

Overall, these writings reveal that Bengali Muslim women were not passive agents; instead, they actively and critically engaged with the political transformations of early twentieth-century Bengal. Based on what mentioned earlier, sometimes their responses aligned with expressions of nationalist enthusiasm and economic support for indigenous production and some other times, it reflected scepticism towards the social costs of political activism. This reason is exactly why their approach altogether cannot be considered as a unified ideological position, and these oeuvres reflect a wide spectrum of perspectives which were highly shaped by political, economic, and social concerns. These various voices' observation complicates conventional narratives of the Swadeshi movement and demonstrates that Muslim women participated in the intellectual debates surrounding colonialism and nationalism (Haidar, 2025).

A more inclusive understanding of the cultural and political dimensions of the nationalist movement is possible only when these marginalized perspectives are actually considered. The writings of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Khairunnesa Khatun, and Razia Khatun Chowdhurani as three pioneer women demonstrate that Muslim women were active participants in the discourse surrounding topics on colonialism, economic self-reliance as well as nationalist ideology. Both, support for anti-colonial resistance and critical awareness of the movement's limitations can be traced in their engagement with the Swadeshi movement; all this interaction thereby underscores their intellectual agency in the political debates of colonial Bengal (Haidar, 2025).

Khadi did not carry a single universal meaning for all women; the observation of the Dalit and Bengali Muslim women's cases shows that its symbolic value was shaped by layered social structures, including caste hierarchy and religious identity.

Localized politics and regional variations

The politics of khadi intersected with local reform movements in various regions of the colonial India. Acting as a powerful symbol of nationalism and moral ideals were aspects Khadi and swadeshi narratives underscored (Trivedi, 2007; Gupta, 2012). For instance, in the United Provinces (present-day Uttar Pradesh), swadeshi clothing and khadi production were adapted in ways that clearly reflected caste and gendered expectations. This influenced women's roles in

public and domestic spheres (Gupta, 2012). Across India, involvement with khadi fostered participation in community self-help and economic activity. At the same time, it also served as a marker of women's empowerment and autonomy in some contexts (Tripathi & Mathpal, 2025; Ambesh, 2015). These dynamics demonstrate that clothing in the Indian Independence Movement functioned as a multidimensional cultural practice; rather than serving solely as a symbol of nationalist sentiment, it mediated political aims and social norms (Trivedi, 2007; Gupta, 2012; Ambesh, 2015).

Women's dress choices were impacted by negotiations between nationalist imperatives and communal identities; hence, in these contexts, female dress was not a *uniformly* celebratory of nationalist goals. Instead, khadi and nationalist dress operated as a multidimensional cultural practice mediating political aims and gender norms, but also, social regulation (Trivedi, 2007; Gupta, 2024; Ambesh, 2015).

In conclusion, on one level, clothing functioned as a political tool. As mentioned before, spinning and wearing khadi provided a tangible way for Indians, including women, to reject colonial economic structures and assert collective agency. In this view, the presence of khadi at public gatherings became a marker of nationalist identity and shared purpose. Simultaneously, clothing was a site of social regulation in the Indian society; in fact, normative expectations about women's attire reinforced gendered assumptions about respectability. While khadi could open spaces for public participation, it could also constrain the ways women were expected to represent nationalism.

09 Conclusion

This research has examined how women's clothing functioned as a contested cultural and political site during the Indian Independence Movement, with particular emphasis on khadi as a central material and symbolic case. With the use of feminist and postcolonial scholarship alongside nationalist discourse, and feminist literature, the research has demonstrated that clothing operated simultaneously as a symbol of resistance, a form of moral discipline, and, a mechanism of social regulation. Rather than acting as a direct causal force in anti-colonial struggle, clothing functioned as a mediating cultural form through which national identity and social hierarchies were continuously negotiated. Within nationalist discourse, clothing—especially khadi—was filled with ethical, economic, and symbolic significance. Through its association with the Swadeshi movement and the boycott of British goods, it turned into a recognizable symbol of anti-colonial resistance. Clothing was considered a tool of moral discipline in Gandhian thought. This is the reason why spinning and wearing khadi eventually signified simplicity and commitment to collective national goals. This approach is how women's clothing enabled participation in the nationalist movement. It offered an accessible and socially sanctioned mode of political engagement, especially for those limited by household

responsibilities; nevertheless, this inclusion was neither neutral nor universally empowering. Using feminist and postcolonial scholarship, the research has highlighted how nationalist constructions of womanhood placed women within the "inner" spiritual domain of the nation. Women were positioned in this framework as custodians of cultural authenticity, and their clothing became eventually a negotiation site between the new boundaries of tradition and modernity. The "new woman" was expected to be educated and politically aware as well as modest and morally restrained. A central role in producing and maintaining this ideal was played by clothing, particularly khadi. Women in this regard were not passive carriers of nationalist symbolism; in contrast, they were active agents of it. In fact, many women actively reshaped the meanings of khadi through their daily practice. The research has further emphasized that the meanings of women's clothing were not "uniform" across Indian society. Considering examples from Dalit and Muslim contexts, the analysis has shown that depending on social location, khadi and nationalist clothing were interpreted and experienced differently. For Dalit women, the adoption of khadi could involve pressures to conform to upper-caste ideals of acceptability. This is closely relatable to the extent how nationalist dress politics intersected with caste hierarchies. For Muslim women, engagement with swadeshi practices was hugely shaped by various elements, e.g., religious identity, economic considerations, and, political ambivalence which all resulted in a range of responses beginning from support and ending to critique. These variations underscore the two different sides of clothing; on one side, it was a powerful symbol of unity, and on the other, it was a site of negotiation shaped by layered identities and power relations.

Apropos women's agency within these limits, it can be said that as they actively interpreted, adapted, and sometimes resisted dominant sartorial norms which means they were not merely passive recipients of nationalist prescriptions. Throughout the various ways and stages of their participation into the movement (e.g., spinning, selective adoption of khadi, or critical engagement in literary and political discourse), women actively contributed to shaping the meanings of nationalist clothing. As a complex phenomenon, women's clothing in the Indian Independence Movement successfully addressed three important functions at once: as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance, a tool for shaping national identity, and a mechanism for regulating gender and social norms. This research transcends narrow narratives of resistance and emphasizes the complex ways material culture engages with political life. This aim is achieved via placing clothing within broader frameworks of various elements, e.g., gender, caste, religion, and colonial power. Finally, the study of women's clothing reveals that nationalism is equally articulated through formal political institutions, and through everyday practices. Clothing—as both a personal and public expression—provided a powerful medium through which individuals engaged with the nation.

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