An interesting and significant aspect of the freedom movement in India was that along with the struggle against colonial rule, vigorous efforts were made to find an alternative path of development. While several people in India were eager to ‘develop’ as much as the British and later some others wanted to industrialise as rapidly as the Soviets, there were others who kept alive the concept of small and cottage-scale development to be based in largely self-reliant rural communities.

This viewpoint was most vigorously articulated by Mahatma Gandhi who popularised the spinning wheel or ‘charkha’ to symbolise this aspect of self-rule or ‘swaraj’. Gandhi’s early experiences with the charkha are still significant in the context of the ‘large vs small, global vs local’ debate.

In a significant book ‘Hind Swaraj’ or ‘Indian Home Rule’ he wrote in 1908: “It is difficult to measure the harm that Manchester has done to us. It is due to Manchester that Indian handicraft has all but disappeared. But I make a mistake. How can Manchester be blamed? We wore Manchester cloth and this is why Manchester wove it.” So Gandhi argued strongly in favour of going back to the self-reliant production of clothes in villages, a task in which charkha will have the crucial role of spinning the yarn, which will be used further by the handloom weavers to produce entirely hand-made cloth, called khadi or khaddar (hard-spun, hand-woven cloth).

Mahatma Gandhi recognised that given the low per capita land availability in villages, the Indian peasant needed some additional craft work that could be pursued easily by the family without much capital investment. He wrote quite clearly in 1919: “Without a cottage industry the Indian peasant is doomed. He cannot maintain himself from the produce of the land.”

In 1921 he wrote: “I have seen women beaming with joy to see the spinning wheel work, for they know that they can through that rustic instrument both feed and clothe themselves.”

When an Indian mill-owner heard of Gandhi’s efforts, he called upon him to convince him that the best way of reducing dependence on imports was to establish more Indian mills.
“I am not doing exactly that,” Gandhi replied “but I am engaged in the revival of the spinning wheel.”

“What is that?”—the mill-owner asked, feeling still more at sea.

After explaining his work to him, Gandhi concluded: “I swear by this form of Swadeshi, because through it I can provide work to the semi-starved semi-employed women of India. My idea is to get these women to spin yarn, and to clothe the people of India with khadi woven out of it.”

It is clear from this episode that Gandhi’s concern was not confined to reducing the dependence on foreign mills, he was equally eager to reduce the villagers’ dependence on domestic mills in the context of that produce which could be made by villagers themselves.

Gandhi was well aware how hidden state subsidies help the big industry and hinder the cottage industry: “In the open market a more organised industry will always be able to drive out a less organised one, much more so when the former is assisted by bounties and can command unlimited capital and can therefore afford to sell its manufactures at a temporary loss. Such has been the tragic fate of many enterprises in this country.”

Therefore he asked for a different type of socio-economic evaluation: “I therefore maintain that, though yard per yard khadi may be dearer than mill-made cloth, in its totality and in terms of the villagers it is the most economic and practical proposition without a rival. Khadi may be interpreted to include other village industries for the purpose of a thorough examination of the proposition.”

Much earlier he made it clear that he linked economics closely to moral and ethical principles. In 1924 he wrote: “That economics is untrue which ignores or disregards moral values. The extension of the law of non-violence in the domain of economics means nothing less than the introduction of moral values as a factor to be considered in regulating international commerce.”

These views were reflected increasingly in Mahatma Gandhi’s perception of the role of a consumer or a buyer. For Gandhi a buyer in need of a product should not enter the market merely to maximise his satisfaction. Instead he should be guided to a large extent by social responsibility. He unhesitatingly exhorted people again and again to buy khadi and support it, ignoring questions such as coarseness or unevenness of the fabric.
Closely linked to this is the concept of ‘Swadeshi’. Literally this means ‘my country’ but Gandhi used the word in a much broader sense. Explaining this concept he wrote in 1916: “Swadeshi is that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote. In the domain of economics I should use only things that are produced by my immediate neighbours and serve those industries by making them efficient and complete where they might be found wanting.”

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INTERPRETED in this way Swadeshi will take India to a stage where every village of India will almost be a self-supporting and self-contained unit, exchanging only such necessary commodities with other villages as are not locally producable.”

In 1931 he declared: “A votary of Swadeshi will carefully study his environment and try to help his neighbours wherever possible by giving preference to local manufactures even if they are of an inferior grade or dearer in price than things manufactured elsewhere. He will try to remedy their defects, but will not give them up, because of their defects and take to foreign manufactures.”

Gandhi explained that the concept of Swadeshi did not involve any ill feeling towards foreigners or other related narrow feelings. He wrote in 1923: “My definition of Swadeshi is well known. I must not serve my distant neighbour at the expense of the nearest. It is never vindictive or punitive. It is in no sense narrow, for I buy from every part of the world what is needed for my growth. I refuse to buy from anybody anything however nice or beautiful, if it interferes with my growth or injures those whom nature has made my first care. I buy useful healthy literature from every part of the world. I buy surgical instruments from England, pins and pencils from Austria, and watches from Switzerland. But I will not buy an inch of the finest cotton fabric from England or Japan, or any other part of the world, because it has injured and increasingly injures millions of inhabitants of India. I hold it to be sinful for me to refuse to buy the cloth spun and woven by the needy millions of India’s paupers and to buy foreign cloth although it may be superior in quality to the Indian hand-spun.”

In 1931 he warned: “But even Swadeshi like any other good thing can be ridden to death if it is made a fetish. That is a danger that must be guarded against. To reject foreign manufactures merely because they are foreign and to go on wasting national time and money to promote manufactures in one’s country for which it
is not suited, would be criminal folly and a negation of the Swadeshi spirit. A true votary of Swadeshi will never harbour ill-will towards the foreigner; he will not be moved by antagonism towards anybody on earth. Swadeshism is not a cult of hatred. It is a doctrine of self-less service that has its roots in the purest ahimsa, that is, love.”

Swadeshi should be used to support not the products of local mills but that of village industry. In 1926 Gandhi said clearly: “The test of Swadeshi is not the universality of the use of an article which goes under the name of Swadeshi, but the universality of participation in the production or manufacture of such an article. Thus considered mill-made cloth is Swadeshi only in a restricted sense. For in its manufacture only an infinitesimal number of India’s millions can take part. But in the manufacture of khaddar, millions can take part.”

He also emphasised the voluntary aspect of Swadeshi: “It is believed by some that Swadeshi could be affected by an embargo on foreign imports after the attainment of Swaraj. But that Swadeshi will be no Swadeshi. It will be a virtue practised under compulsion. True Swadeshi is the invulnerable bulwark of the nation and it can only be said to be accomplished if it is practised as a national duty.”