Ahimsa Center- K-12 Teacher Institute

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<th>Title of Lesson:</th>
<th>Redefining Civilization and Identity Through Swadeshi, Spinning and Khadi</th>
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<td>Lesson By:</td>
<td>Suzannah Taylor</td>
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<td>Grade Level/Subject Areas:</td>
<td>9/10 Global History/ ESL</td>
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<th>Guiding Questions:</th>
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<td>1. What does it mean to be civilized?</td>
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<td>2. How did Gandhi explain civilization?</td>
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<td>3. How does colonialism redefine identity?</td>
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<td>4. How did Gandhi use khadi and spinning to redefine Indian identity and support civilization?</td>
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<td>In this lesson students will explore the concept of “civilization” as defined by themselves, western society and different cultures around the world. Additionally, they will examine Gandhi’s ideas about civilization. Students will look at the impact that colonialism has on identity. Finally, students will examine Gandhi’s use of khadi as a teaching tool-- to instill value (labor), to protest (colonialism) and to redefine Indian identity.</td>
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<th>Lesson Content:</th>
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<td>Mohandas Gandhi was a visionary whose philosophy started a political and spiritual movement in 20th century India. By developing the practice of Ahimsa (nonviolence), he was able to resist political oppression and create change for Indians in both, South Africa and later in British-ruled India. Gandhi’s philosophy was centered around the idea of Satyagraha. In English, this is best translated as Soul Force and describes the positive power one can find within oneself that is able to create positive change without using violence or causing harm to others.</td>
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| Prominent in his writing were reflections on the idea of civilization. Since the British viewed themselves as having helped, or “civilized” India, Gandhi explored the idea of what life would |
be like without the British if they achieved swaraj. Would their absence make India less civilized? Surely not. What would India need to do to continue to promote their civilization? It is helpful to take a look at Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*. Here he explains that all people strive for four objects in life: wealth and power, pleasure, ethics and transcendence (Parel 34-38). Gandhi’s philosophy claims that these four canonical aims should all be pursued in conjunction with one another and should not be allowed to act in isolation. Gandhi scholar Anthony Parel points out that historically, civilizations have tended to prioritize one of these over the others. In the case of India, Parel explains, this could be interpreted as old Indian society having prioritized ethics and spirituality and marginalized wealth and pleasure while modern western cultures did exactly the opposite (Parel “Gandhi and Civilization”). This understanding helps to explain why Gandhi did not perceive Britain as being more civilized than India. Rather, in Gandhi’s criticism of modern civilization, he claims that modern civilization rejects all that came before it and for this reason he insists that traditional India is, in fact, more civilized than the West.

Gandhi also emphasizes the importance of restraint and duty in order to have civilization. True civilization, Gandhi claims, is, “that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves” (Parel 67). He acknowledges the conflict between instinct and civilization and the responsibility we’ve been given to change nature into civilization.

Gandhi’s actions are often misunderstood as having tried to promote his ideal way of living, particularly his ashrams which emphasized self-sufficiency. It must be made clear, however, that Gandhi did not want to revert to an agrarian lifestyle. Rather, he was working to address concerns with peasants in India and their existing conditions. He ran his ashrams with less emphasis on wealth, power and pleasure in an attempt to identify himself with the poor whom he was trying to raise (Parel “Gandhi and Civilization”). The ashram was, in a sense, a place to train people to go back into society, not, as some might interpret, a model for what he wanted society to be.

In particular, one of Gandhi’s best-known practices during his struggle for independence was spinning cloth. In fact, clothing in general embodies many aspects of Gandhi’s experience-- in physical character (dress), in action (spinning) and in thought (his philosophy). Some suggest that a closer look at Gandhi’s attire reveals a parallel between his dress and his intellectual journey over the years. The youngest photos of Gandhi reflect his upbringing in a Hindu household. However, as early as 19, he trained in England as a lawyer and took pride in dressing the part during his stay in London. In this early part of his career, he explains:

> I took on the all too impossible task of becoming an English gentleman. The clothes after the Bombay cut that I was wearing were, I thought, unsuitable for English society, and I got new ones at the Army and Navy Stores. … I wasted ten pounds on an evening suit made in Bond Street… As if this were not enough to make me look the thing, I directed my attention to other details that were supposed to go towards the making of an English gentleman. I was told it was necessary for me to take lessons in dancing, French and elocution. (Gandhi *Autobiography* 45)
Here we see that while in England, Gandhi not only rejected his Indian attire, but also tried to acquire new skills, such as dancing, that would help him to acclimate to Europe. By taking elocution classes, he even worked to perfect skills (speaking English) that he had already mastered. In this excerpt we also see how Gandhi later appears remorseful for some of these attempts to fit in. He describes “wasting” ten pounds and claims he “was told” he needed to make changes, as if to imply that he naïvely accepted advice from others with no thought of his own. He even humorously pokes fun at himself when he says, “As if this were not enough to make me look the thing.”

In 1893 Gandhi went to South Africa where he became a prominent figure in the Indian community. He began his fight for the rights of Indians and started wearing a turban. One day he was asked to take it off by a magistrate. Gandhi notes:

> The question of wearing the turban had great importance in the state of things. Being obliged to take off one’s Indian turban would be pocketing an insult. So I thought I had better bid good-bye to the Indian turban and begin wearing an English hat, which would save me from the insult and the unpleasant controversy. (Gandhi *Autobiography* 94)

However, a friend offered him contrary advice, which he followed by writing an editorial to the newspaper defending his headdress. Refusing to comply with the western dress code was a noteworthy action and helped to define Gandhi both, as a lawyer and political activist. And so, during these early days of his time in South Africa, he wore his turban. It was only when he was being sworn in as an advocate of the Supreme Court a year later that he consented to remove his turban for the first time. He notes, “I wanted to reserve my strength for fighting bigger battles,” and even goes so far to say, “When at Rome, do as the Romans do” when explaining his action to his friends (Gandhi *Autobiography* 129). In this action, we see that he has not entirely rejected British influence. Likewise, in 1899, Gandhi participates in the Anglo-Boer war on the side of the British, serving in the Indian Ambulance Corps. Here he dons a western style military uniform.

Once Gandhi returns to India, we see him fully develop his own identity through attire. Gandhi believed in the symbolic power of clothing, and knew that his image had become the face of the Indian struggle for independence. In 1915 he arrived back from South Africa dressed as a peasant to start his Satyagraha Ashram, dedicated to non-cooperation with the British Raj. In 1921 he started wearing the khadi loincloth he wore for the rest of his life. (Khadi is hand-woven cloth using hand-spun yarn, which can be cotton, wool or silk. Traditionally, every village in India makes its own khadi.) It was a rejection of European civilization and colonialism. It was also a call to escape the poverty that Indians had endured for so long. Gandhi emphasized his preference for wearing a loincloth rather than wearing foreign-made clothing and believed that swadeshi, or homemade products, would help Indians break the cycle of poverty. Additionally, his loincloth protested British economic practices. The British were taking Indian grown cotton and exporting it raw to its own mills in England where it was turned into fabric and then sold back to Indians at high profit.

An awareness of Gandhi’s ideas about civilization are critical to understanding why he did not simply support a plan to duplicate the vast cotton mills of England in India. Rather, he wanted to revive the artistry of Indian clothing and honor the dignity of making it. In one piece of cloth,
Gandhi offered the poor self-sufficiency, independence of mind and dignity. Gandhi’s concept of Khadi economics was unique because the spinners and weavers were producing only to meet the needs of a specific geographical area rather than for export, and although the spinning movement was rooted in a valid need for clothing, there was no sense of competition among villages. Gandhi attributed the success of the movement to having convinced local people of the importance of wearing khadi so that production efforts met the demand for local styles and preferences. Peter Herndon writes, “The temptation to produce for profit at any level, whether it be cotton growers or cloth distributors had to be balanced with the overall goal of keeping the khadi cloth prices at the lowest possible level. Again, Gandhi’s emphasis on the principle of self-sacrifice was paramount” (Herndon par. 5).

Gandhi was sensitive to the consequences of shifting toward Indian self-sufficiency. The decline of factory production and the undoing of such a viable method of production was bound to have negative repercussions for some. He even went so far as to visit cloth factories on one of his trips to England. The cotton being used in these factories had come from India. As a result of his efforts, less cloth was being sold and profits had declined. Consequently, many factory workers had been laid off. While in Lancashire, England, he met with many groups of unemployed cotton workers. Surprisingly, “Gandhi was received with sympathy and affection by the Lancashire cotton workers, even though they were the ones hit hardest by the boycott. It was a sympathy and affection that he returned” (Duckworth par. 4).

Gandhi found great value in the practice of spinning. He believed that the physical labor involved in spinning offered a spiritual experience and an opportunity for daily meditation. He felt that it prevented idleness and enabled villages to become self-contained. He believed that the spinning wheel had the ability to deliver the poor from the oppression of the rich. In a culture that had for so long been defined by the divisions of the caste system, he also recognized the potential for khadi to act a tool for unification. He saw value in the fact that it was a revival of ancient arts and crafts and could represent both, the rich and the poor. It could also provide a moral and spiritual bond between the masses by instilling a sense of community that extended beyond barriers of class and caste. He thought the revolution of the wheel represented the change that Indians would experience as they pursued swaraj. Gandhi explained:

> Charkha (spinning wheel) is the symbol of the nation's prosperity and therefore freedom. It is a symbol not of commercial war but of commercial peace. It bears not a message of ill-will towards the nations of the earth but of goodwill and self-help. It will not need the protection of a navy threatening a world's peace and exploiting its resources, but it needs the religious determination of millions to spin their yarn in their own homes as today they cook their food in their own homes. I may deserve the curse of posterity for many mistakes of omission and commission, but I am confident of earning its blessings for suggesting a revival of the Charkha. I stake my all on it. For every revolution of the wheel spins peace, goodwill and love. And with all that, inasmuch as the loss of it brought about India's slavery, its voluntary revival with all its implications must mean India's freedom. (Gandhi *Young India*)

Therefore, it is understood that by wearing the loincloth, Gandhi did not attempt to dignify his costume. Instead, he attempted to identify himself with India’s peasants and to raise awareness
of their condition among the British. He also attempted to redefine Indian identity—in appearance, behavior and thought—by its own cultural values instead of the values that had been assigned to India through years of British rule. Khadi was an integral part of a constructive program that Gandhi felt needed to go hand in hand with his political philosophy (Parel 170). It was part of the greater truth that accompanied his nonviolence. Years later, Gandhi’s granddaughter claimed that khadi was “the heritage of humanity, the atom-bomb of nonviolence” (Field par. 2). Just as the spinner was asked to believe that his or her efforts contributed to a greater effort that had the potential to provide clothing for all of India, the Indian citizen was also asked to have faith in nonviolence as a tool for change and Indian independence. Khadi represented multiple aspects of his philosophy—self-sufficiency, discipline, meditation and independence. An examination of khadi coupled with an understanding of Gandhi’s ideas about civilization, provides us with a complete example of Gandhi’s thought put into action.

State Content Standards:
NY State Social Studies Standard 2 (World History): Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

Materials Needed:
• Journals
• Chart paper, markers
• Laptop, LCD projector

Suggested Teaching Activities:
Day One
• Vocab activity: Civilization (in groups students draw, act, sing, define word)
• Journal write: What is civilization or to be civilized?
• Digital story (“What is Civilization?”)/Written response
• Class discussion using digital story (frame by frame)
• Explanation of Gandhi’s ideas about civilization

Day Two
• Powerpoint (information about Gandhi’s use of Khadi)
• Worksheet- Identifying things in your own life/culture that represent: meditation, discipline, chores, traditional arts, financial independence, protest, freedom from discrimination, self-help, providing for basic needs, artistic expression.
• Spinning activity
• Homework response

Bibliography:


