

Swaraj and Swadeshi: textile labels of the Indian Independence Movement

Susan Meller

MOHANDAS KARAMCHAND GANDHI (1869-1948) made *Swaraj* and *Swadeshi* the rallying cries of India's Independence movement. *Swaraj* means 'self-rule,' and *Swadeshi*, 'of one's own country.' The Swadeshi movement began as a protest against Viceroy Lord Curzon's partition of Bengal in 1905. Its leader, Surendranath Banerjea (1848-1925), promoted a boycott of British manufactured goods. After Gandhi returned to India from South Africa in 1915, he expanded the boycott, focusing on imported British-made cloth and yarn. He considered Swadeshi to be the 'soul of Swaraj.' In the weekly journal *Young India*, which Gandhi published from 1919 to 1931, he wrote:

'India cannot be free as long as India voluntarily encourages or tolerates the economic drain which has been going on for the past century and a half. Boycott of foreign goods means no more and no less than boycott of foreign cloth. Foreign cloth constitutes the largest drain voluntarily permitted by us. It means sixty cores of rupees (600 million rupees) annually paid by us for piece goods. If India could make a successful effort to stop that drain, she can gain Swaraj by that one act.'

The Secret of Swaraj, Young India, January 19, 1921

Swadeshi manifested itself in many ways, but the most inclusive and obvious was through the carding and spinning of cotton, which was then handwoven into khadi.

The painting in (1) depicts some of the steps in that process: farmers plowing fields in preparation for sowing cotton seeds; men cleaning raw cotton; Gandhi and other men spinning cotton by hand with drop spindles and a spinning wheel; and, in the distance, more men approaching with a flag of the Indian Independence movement.

The All-India Congress established and funded khadi depots to distribute the raw materials needed to spin and weave khadi, as well as stores where people could buy the finished goods.

While a sizeable number of Indian people – rich and poor alike – clothed themselves in khadi, making it a visual symbol of nationhood, many more continued to wear factory-made cloth, both British and Indian. Gandhi was well aware of this and did not promote the boycott of Indian mills. Many of these mills and merchants responded by advertising their cloth with labels that declared they were *Swadeshi* (2, 3, 4). These labels did their part in encouraging people to buy Indian goods rather than British.

A potent symbol of the Indian Independence movement was *Bharat Mata* (Mother India). She was depicted as a fierce and protective Mother Goddess, the vanquisher of demons, the

liberator of the oppressed, the defender of dharma. *Bharat Mata*, also known as *Hind Devi*, was modeled after the Hindu deity *Durga* who was often shown accompanied by her lion mount. Since *Swadeshi* textile firms relied on their labels to let people know that they supported the Independence movement, they incorporated the iconography of the movement – and who better than *Mother India* to validate their products (5, 6).

Another means of declaring a company's allegiance to the Independence movement was to issue cards along with their cloth as a sort of premium that featured men and women leaders of the Independence movement – freedom fighters. They were scholars,



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1 *Way to Swaraj*, c. 1930s. Print. Artist: Ghasi Ram Sharma, Nathdwara; publisher: S.S. Brijbasi & Sons, Karachi 7.5 x 11.5"

2 Ahmedabad Ginning and Manufacturing Co., Ltd. c. 1920s-30s. Textile label. This label features Ganesha, god of new beginnings and remover of obstacles. The Bengali words at the bottom of the label proclaim, 'This is very good Swadeshi'. On either side of Ganesha's head is the phrase in Bengali, *Vande Mataram* (Mother, I praise thee), the title of a poem written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894). An ode to the Motherland, it later became a powerful anthem of the Independence movement 4.75 x 4.25"

3 Swadeshi Cloth Merchant. c. 1920s-30s. Textile label. *Usha Kanta* (Beautiful Dawn), perhaps alluding to the emergence of a free India 6.25 x 5"

4 The Swadeshi Mills Co., Ltd. c. 1920s-30s. Textile label. In 1886, Jamssetji Tata (1839-1904) bought a failing textile mill in Bombay and turned it into one of India's top mills. He named it the Swadeshi Mills in order to mark the beginning of the national Swadeshi movement. Tata Sons Ltd. became the agents for this company, as well as other textile mills 4 x 3.25"

5 Vijaya Mills. c. 1920s-30s. Textile label. The Hindi words at the bottom translate as *Vijay Devi* (Victory Goddess). Here *Durga* is depicted with a trident, sword, shield, and helmet-like headdress 9 x 7.25"

6 The Indian Manufacturing Co., Ltd. c. 1920s-30s. Textile label. *Bharat Mata* as *Durga* is shown leaning on a caparisoned elephant that holds a sacred lotus blossom in its trunk. Her lion mount rests at her feet as the sun rises on a new day. The Hindi words at the bottom translate as *Swadeshi Uncho Mal* (High-quality Swadeshi Goods) 6.25" DIAMETER

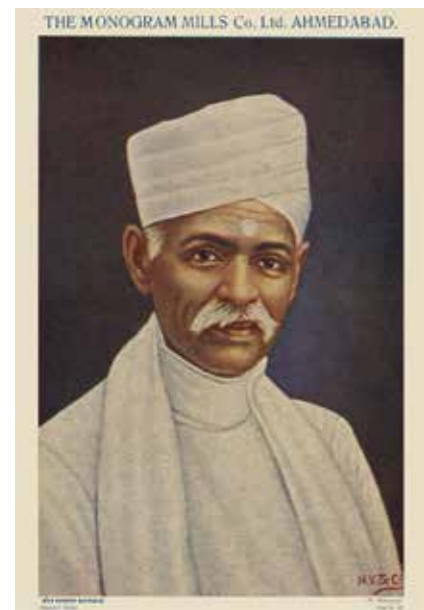
A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history

Mahatma Gandhi, *Harijan*, November 19, 1938

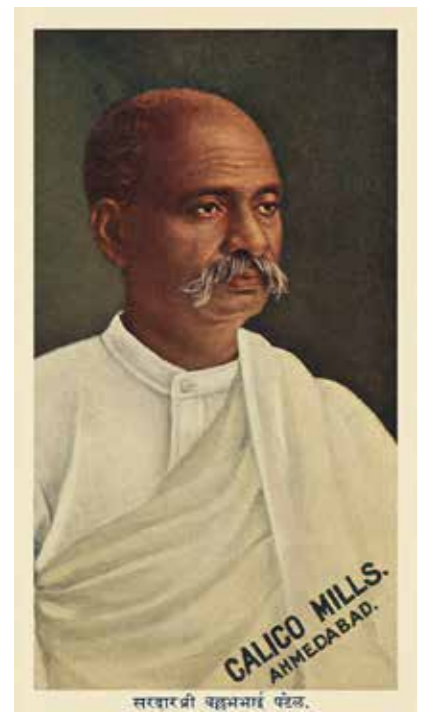
writers, poets, educators, lawyers and statesmen who were joined by countless ordinary Indian people in marches and demonstrations. Freedom fighters all – they persevered in spite of beatings, arrests, and imprisonments. Many were women who marched with Gandhi and were imprisoned along with him. They were active in the Indian National Congress and served as some of its leaders (7–11).

On August 14th, 1947 India achieved her Independence. However, Satyagraha, or nonviolence, which Gandhi and so many of his followers believed in, was soon to be drowned in the bloodshed of Partition. 🇮🇳

This text and the accompanying images are from Susan Meller's recently published book, *LABELS of EMPIRE: Textile Trademarks. Windows into India in the time of the Raj*. www.labelsofempire.com
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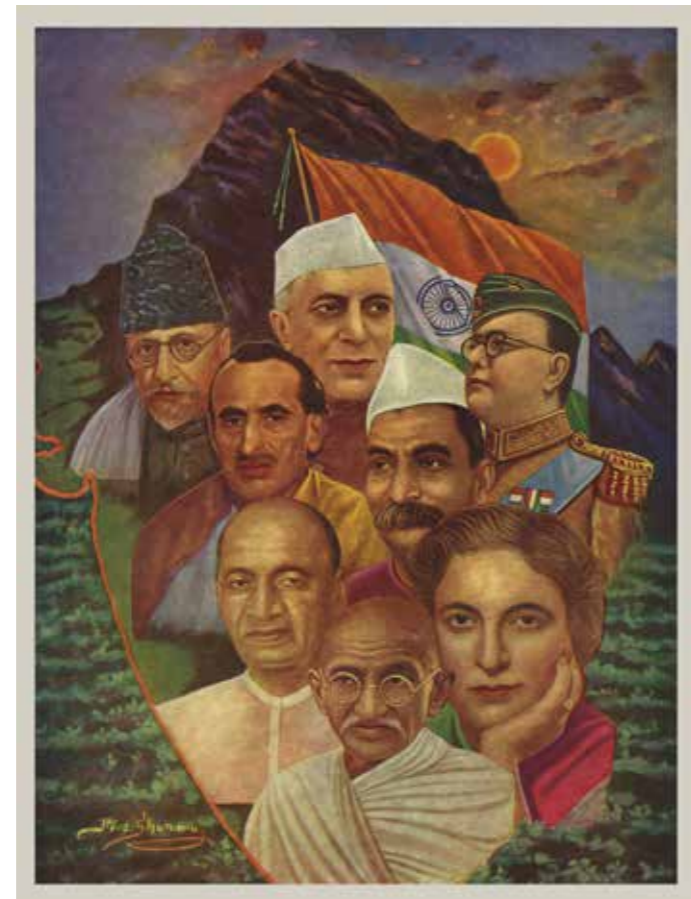
8



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11
Leaders of India. 1949. Calendar print. Artist: M. L. Sharma. 9.5 x 7"

Clockwise from center top:
Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964). First prime minister of India,
Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-1945). Leader of the Indian National Army
Rajendra Prasad (1884-1963). First president of India (1950-1962).
Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (1900-1990). First woman president of the UN General Assembly, sister of Jawaharlal Nehru.
Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948). Leader of the Indian Independence movement.
Sardar Patel (1875-1950). First deputy prime minister of India.
Aracharya Kripalani (1888-1982). President of the Indian National Congress (1946).
Maulana Azad (1888-1958). President of the Indian National Congress (1923).

7
Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. c. 1930s-40s. Textile mill card. Pandit Malaviya (1861-1946) was a scholar and three-time president of the Indian National Congress
5.5 x 3.5"

8
Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. c. 1930s. Textile mill card. Sardar Patel (1875-1950) was a lawyer and first deputy prime minister of India
5.25 x 3.25"

9
Hansa Mehta. c. 1920s-30s. Textile mill card. Hansa Mehta (1897-1995) was a prolific writer, president of the All-Indian Women's Conference, and delegate to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. She is shown here spinning yarn with a drop spindle.
6 x 3.75"

10
Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. c. 1930s. Textile mill label. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903-1988) was a progressive feminist leader of the Congress Socialist party. She was well-known for her work as a promoter of Indian handicrafts, theater, and dance.
3.75" DIAMETER

Book Review

Originally published in *Selvedge Magazine* issue 116

LABELS of EMPIRE, Textile Trademarks. Windows into India in the time of the Raj

By Susan Meller

Goff Books, Publisher ORO Editions, Available from ACC Art Books UK

Binding: Hardback, Size: 299 x 229mm
544 pages, 1285 colour illustrations

www.labelsofempire.com

Susan Meller's remarkable work delves deep into the history of the Raj, uncovering a treasure trove of insights through the lens of cloth labels. Her extensive research and unmatched collection of labels present a breathtaking journey through time. The book masterfully weaves together historical events and cultural influences, all within the confines of these small yet impactful artifacts.

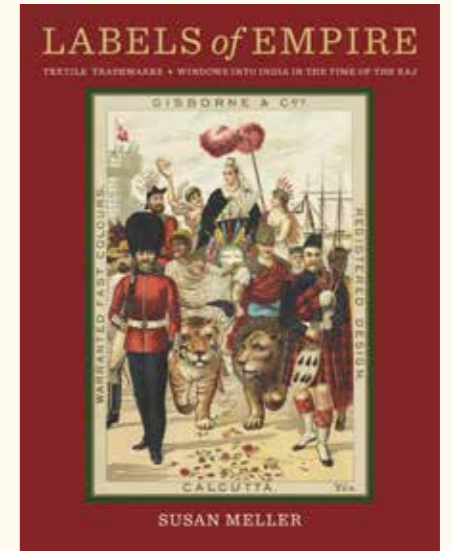
In the late 19th century, as the British textile industry flourished, the book sheds light on an ingenious strategy employed by British manufacturers. By adorning bolts of cotton fabric with vibrant paper labels featuring Hindu deities and epics, they not only differentiated their products but also appealed to the Indian market. This tactic allowed them to outcompete local Indian weavers with superior designs, lower prices, and faster production cycles. As a consequence, Indian handlooms suffered a blow, pushing the nation towards the Swarj and Swadeshi movement that led ultimately to Independence.

Through lively descriptions, the book paints a vivid picture of the labels' imagery, featuring scenes from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana alongside trademark company logos. The labels became more than just functional markers; they became historical artifacts, collected for their cultural significance.

The narrative seamlessly transitions to the turn of the century, as India sought independence through the Swadeshi movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. The boycott of British goods, including Lancashire cloth, ignited a fire for self-sufficiency. The book beautifully encapsulates the transition from British imports to Indian khadi cloth becoming a symbol of patriotism and freedom, as cottage industries embraced homespun, hand-woven fabric.

In *Labels of Empire*, Meller skillfully pieces together the treads of history using the unassuming medium of cloth labels. The result is a captivating tale of economic competition, cultural influence, and the power of a nation's determination. This outstanding work offers readers a fresh perspective on the Raj era, making it a must-read for history enthusiasts and anyone fascinated by the intersection of culture and commerce. 🇮🇳

— Geeta Khandelwal



Remarkable on many levels like the India it portrays Meller's book will probably never be rivalled by a competing text. Seldom does one have the opportunity to behold the first truly accessible, yet final word on the subject, but that is what we have with Labels of Empire.
— *Hali Magazine*

Susan Meller's book is about some bits of ephemera – spare textile labels that were never meant to be kept but we are glad that so many were because they are so stylish, and also glad that Meller has written so well about them.
— *Journal of the Oxford Asian Textile Group*

www.labelsofempire.com

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