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Khadi: A Narrative of Lived Theology

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Abstract: While other authors in this special issue analyze the nature of narrative theology, I highlight the narratives of the sisters of the Brahma Vidya Mandir ashram, a group of women followers of M. K. Gandhi (1869–1948) and his disciple, friend, and spiritual successor Vinoba Bhave (1895–1982), who came together in 1959 to form an intentional community with a spiritual purpose. One of the central practices of this community is spinning cotton that is then woven into khadi (hand-spun, handwoven cloth). From this khadi, they make their own clothing. Through a brief discussion of their use of khadi, I demonstrate how the theology of the sisters of this ashram is not a separate entity for them, rather it is the warp of the narratives of their lives; their choice of khadi is an example of the seamlessness between their theology and their narratives. As we examine their choice to use khadi, we can isolate and name some of their theological commitments. We can also identify important elements from their narratives that are applicable in multiple contexts. To this end, I conclude this article by imagining how the lives of the sisters of the Brahma Vidya Mandir might serve as a catalyst for change and engagement for us all.

Keywords: Brahma Vidya Mandir; Sarvodaya; Vinoba Bhave; khadi; Gandhi; environmental responsibility; sustainability

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1. Introduction

In a discussion of what it means to live a spiritual life, Usha di,[1] a founding member of the Brahma Vidya Mandir ashram in central India, explains: "My simple definition of a spiritual life is simple living and high thinking. Unless you have simple living, you won't have high thinking. High thinking means in life, not in only words. This is the simplest definition of spirituality."[2] Through this high thinking and simple living, the women in this intentional community demonstrate a seamlessness between their theology and their narratives. Other authors in this special issue analyze the nature of narrative theology. In this article, I highlight the narratives of the sisters of the Brahma Vidya Mandir. I am reluctant to use the term "theology" because of the systematic, separate from living, and Christian assumptions often associated with it. However, in the context of the theme of narrative theology and change, I use the term with caution in a way that applies specifically to this particular community, that is their "theology" is not a separate entity, rather it is the warp of the narratives of their lives.

The story of the sisters of the Brahma Vidya Mandir ashram begins with M. K. Gandhi (1869–1948) and his disciple, friend, and spiritual successor, Vinoba Bhave (1895–1982). Gandhi coined the term Sarvodaya—a holistic uplifting of all humanity, of all life (Dharmadhikari 2000; Hoffman 1961; Ostergaard 1971)—and Vinoba developed it into a successful grassroots movement that inspired people throughout India (and beyond) to work for a better world. Satyagraha (holding fast to truth) and Ahimsa (no harm, nonviolence), in combination with Sarvodaya, are terms that capture the central theological ideas that are inseparable from the work of Gandhi, Vinoba, and those who follow them. To discuss the sisters' theology as separate from their narrative is to impose a distinction foreign to them. Like Gandhi, they resonate with his famous saying, "My life is my message."

As an applied ethicist, I focus on the ways we apply knowledge, make decisions, and choose to live. This article is based on a long-term ethnographic project in which I lived with and learned from the sisters of the Brahma Vidya Mandir ashram. There are multiple aspects of their lives that are worthy of exploration. However, for my purpose here, I focus on their commitment to making and wearing khadi (hand-spun, handwoven cloth). By briefly examining their choice of khadi, we can isolate and name some of their theological commitments. We can also identify important elements that are applicable in multiple contexts. To this end, I conclude this article by imagining how the lives of the sisters of the Brahma Vidya Mandir might serve as a catalyst for change and engagement for us all.

2. Sisters of the Brahma Vidya Mandir

In the late 1950s, a group of women who followed Gandhi and Vinoba were part of the Sarvodaya Movement. They were working for the betterment of society in multiple ways. Some were social workers in various cities, others were walking with Vinoba on his Bhoodan Yagna (the Land Gift Movement),[3] and still others were walking across India for peace. Rejecting traditional societal expectations, these women wanted to follow a spiritual path. Several of them approached Vinoba and inquired about the possibility of them separating from society and dedicating themselves to the pursuit of a spiritual life. Vinoba, believing in the full equality of women and critical of the cultural limitations and challenges imposed on them, supported their request (Bhave 1995). He gave the women his ashram in rural central Maharashtra India to form a spiritual community.

On 30 March 1959, about a dozen women arrived at the Brahma Vidya Mandir and began making it their home. Under the influence of Vinoba, they chose to identify five elements that would serve as anchors for the new narratives of their lives. Though we can identify them as "theological" principles, they are in fact elements that are inseparable from how the sisters live: (1) Shrama (manual labor), (2) Swadhyaya (self-study), (3) Brahmacharya (chastity/control of the passions), (4) Bhakti (devotion), and (5) Samuhik Sadhana (spiritual practice together as a community). Samuhik Sadhana is a term coined by Vinoba. Usha di explains "Samuhik" as "sitting together in a group," and "Sadhana" as "sustained practice for spiritual attainment . . . sadhana is spiritual practice, it is about who aspires for a spiritual life and who works accordingly" (Usha di 2020). Elsewhere she says "Sadhana means we are here for spiritual life, so we try to practice spiritual life. One who tries to practice a spiritual life is a Sadhak (seeker of spiritual things). Here it is *spiritual* community living, not community living" (Usha di 2006). Sheilah di, a sister who joined the community in the mid 1960s, agrees and says "We all are one samuh. Samuh means not only to stay together, but to stay together with one same thought, same service, and oneness of heart" (Sheilah di 2008). Samuhik Sadhana is an example of how the sisters' philosophical and theological commitments are tightly intertwined with their living narratives.

Their focus on unity and oneness coincides with their embrace of an Advaita Vedanta worldview, an understanding of the world built on the underlying unity of all life. The very makeup of the ashram's community demonstrates their thinking: the sisters are from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, they have varying degrees of education, and they come from geographic locations across the country and around the world.[4] In the ashram, they are all considered equal. Their embrace of diversity, on multiple levels, is one of the ways in which their simple living and "high thinking" of Advaita Vedanta are intertwined. There are many other aspects of the sisters' lives that demonstrate how their theological commitments are intricately interwoven into how they live. For the purpose of this article, I focus on one: their making and exclusive wearing of hand-spun, handwoven cloth—khadi.

3. Making Khadi

For the sisters of this ashram and their associates[5] working for Sarvodaya throughout India (and beyond), khadi is a symbol and so much more.[6] As contemporary Gandhians and followers of Vinoba, the sisters demonstrate how making and wearing khadi is a priority for multiple reasons. As a member of the Brahma Vidya Mandir, each sister, as she

is able, spins cotton and makes her own khadi clothing. They spin communally during their 10:30 morning prayer, during other meetings, and on their own time. Over the period of a year, they will spin enough thread to make at least one new garment (a sari or salwar kameez—draw-string pants with a loose-fitting tunic—and a dupatta/scarf). After a brief photographic depiction of their process of making khadi,[7] I turn our attention to a brief analysis of the theological and ethical significance of the sisters' commitment to khadi.

For the sisters, khadi begins with cotton. In central Maharashtra, cotton is grown on small village farms and processed locally into punis (slivers) (See Figure 1, image #1). Then, with several different types of charkhas (spinning wheels), the sisters spin the punis into thread (See Figure 1, images #2–6). Once they have several full spindles (See Figure 1, image #7), they remove the thread from the spindle and make a gundi, or skein (See Figure 1, images #8–12). Although the sisters used to weave their own cloth, they now take their gundis to a nearby ashram that receives hand-spun thread from several surrounding communities and weaves the cotton khadi (See Figure 1, images #14,15). Several times a year, the sisters take their collected gundis (See Figure 1, image #13) to the weavers. The gundis are weighed, and the sisters receive an equivalent weight in cloth: when a sister delivers three kilos of spun thread, she receives three kilos of woven khadi cloth (See Figure 1, image #16–18).

This process of spinning and making khadi captures the "simple living and high thinking" of the sisters in multiple ways. Let us examine how in three areas of their lives: (1) the continuity between their thinking and living: between their theological commitments and their narratives, (2) their commitment to living sustainably (in terms of both economic independence and environmental responsibility), and (3) their demonstration of what Sarvodaya can look like.

Figure 1. *Cont.*

Figure 1. Process of making khadi at the Brahma Vidya Mandir.

4. Continuity of Living and Thinking

Living with the intention of Samuhik Sadhana, the sisters' purpose for being together goes beyond simply living as a community. Together they are working towards enlightenment not as individuals, but as a community of women. In the worldview out of which they operate, there is no separation, no light, between spirituality and living, between Brahman (ultimate reality) and life. Making khadi is part of their "prayer life."

The actual act of spinning is meditative and requires mindfulness. There is a rhythmic, synchronized dance between the cotton in one hand and the wooden knob with which they turn the wheels of the charkha in the other. It is a dance between the speed at which they are pulling the cotton puni, and the speed at which they are turning the charka wheel, creating a spin that catches the cotton fibers and twists them into thread. This takes a lot of patience and concentration at the beginning. Spin too slowly and the thread will be too thick, lumpy, and it will not have enough twist in the fibers. Spin too fast, or pull the puni too fast, and the thread will be too thin and may break. With practice and mindfulness, the sisters are increasingly proficient; spinning can then become a very meditative experience. There is a particularly satisfying whirling hum when the speed at which they turn the wheels of the charkha matches their strokes as they pull the fibers from the puni, such that the tension in the thread being created is just right. It is meditative and can invoke an "in the zone" feeling. Spinning is a productive way to practice mind–body mindfulness. For the sisters, it is simultaneously a tool for enhancing their meditative experience and a way in which they clothe themselves. Just as they twist the cotton fibers into a single strong strand, they are binding together multiple aspects of their lives. They live mindfully, maintaining a basic continuity between what they teach and how they live. In the sisters' narrative of how

they choose to clothe themselves, we see a continuity between their thinking (theological commitments) and how they live, between their simple living and high thinking.

The charkha itself provides another example of how the sisters' beliefs coincide with their making of khadi. In image #6 above, Ramu di is using a charkha that is powered by electricity. She has arthritis and does not have the finger dexterity required to work the hand-cranked charkhas. When using this electric charkha, she remains in the room and is not engaged in other activities. Her spinning machine demonstrates the flexibility of the sisters' thinking and their understanding of Vinoba's concept of truth. According to him, "Truth can be attained by humility, objectivity, and non-insistence . . . There is no dogmatism in it . . . " (Bhave 2004, p. 53). Making and wearing khadi is an important part of the lives of the sisters: being an inclusive community is equally important to them. By being flexible in how they apply their high thinking, Ramu di can participate in the process of making her own khadi.

5. Environmental Responsibility

Though the sisters of the ashram do not label themselves ecofeminists or environmentalists, they live in a manner that is close to the earth, leaving a minimal carbon footprint. Spinning and khadi are a part of this commitment. After investing their time and energy in spinning the thread that is woven into the khadi they use to sew their own clothing, they appreciate the value of the cloth itself. Not surprisingly, they take care of their clothes and use them as long as possible. For example, when a skirt has a hole in it, the sisters mend it. When it gets a bit worn and tattered, rather than throw it out, they wear it when working in the garden or other places where their clothes would get dirty. This preserves their new clothes, allowing them to last longer. Finally, when the skirt is too tattered to wear, even in the garden, they repurpose it yet again: turning it into a mop or a cleaning rag. Only when it is a useless mesh of threads are they willing to throw it out. Even at this point, what they are throwing into the garbage hole is biodegradable. This desire to use an item to its fullest also reflects their appreciation of their use of natural resources, and their commitment to live in the most environmentally responsible way possible.

As mentioned above, the sisters usually spin enough thread to make at least one new outfit every year. This, along with their commitment to nonmaterialism, means they only have a couple sets of clothing. For most of the sisters, all their belongings are contained in their one room. This value of simple living and nonattachment leads some of the sisters to actively work to minimize their possessions. When talking about simple living, Usha di discusses a story in a devotional song written by Tukaram, a Maharashtrian saint:

> He once had a direct experience with God. He was so full of spirit and he wanted to share it with all people. He went out and he said, "I have God, you take it. Take it, take it, take it," so from home to home, he went. And people said, "We don't want God, we don't want God." "Why don't you want God? I am giving it to you for free, not taking anything. I have come to your house, you have not to come to me. Still you don't want it?" "No, we don't want it." "Why? You have so much luggage in your house, then where will you put God?"

She concludes by saying, "That is the position today. People love more furniture, not more God, so if we keep our house free, we will feel more freedom" (Usha di 2006). By making and wearing only khadi, the sisters are opening themselves up for more freedom and more room for God. Their rooms and their minds are not full of clutter, which allows for a seamlessness between their simple, mindful living and their embrace of the all-encompassing reality of Brahman.

Additionally, by spinning cotton—a natural, locally produced product—and sewing their own clothes, the sisters are circumventing the pollution associated with the petroleum used to make synthetic fibers. Reflecting on their use of khadi, Usha di emphasizes how their simple living and high thinking addresses the problem of pollution. She says, "More need, more furniture, more luggage, that means you are contributing to pollution, so this simple way of living is just to save the problem of the age. Pollution is the problem of this

age" (Usha di 2006). Khadi is one example that demonstrates how they are mindful of their use of resources, how they keep waste to a minimum, and how they are careful to create as little pollution as possible.

6. Sarvodaya

Finally, the sisters' use of khadi embodies their commitment to Sarvodaya (uplifting of all humanity, all life). Khadi is the product of manual labor, and in the ashram, all the sisters who are able, spin. It does not matter if one has a Master of Arts in Sanskrit literature, and another is illiterate. This is notable in a societal context where educated, professional, or wealthy individuals often hire other people to do much of the manual labor and tasks required for daily living. Along with doing her own spinning, as a member of the ashram, each sister contributes six-and-a-half hours of work per day that benefits the community. While one sister tends to the cows that they have in their dairy, another writes a commentary on Jnaneshwar, a 13th-century Indian saint from Maharashtra India. As one sister works in their surrounding fields, planting and harvesting their food, another manages the finances and balances the books for the community. Each hour of each sister's work, regardless of whether it is manual or intellectual labor, is counted equally. Usha di explains,

> The other thing, you see, that we try here to live life on manual labor. Outside, you go, the educated people don't have value for manual work and they should establish this value. Otherwise, there will be two divisions – one intellectual and the other hardworking. We should combine it, so that is also in contribution to society. Then, you see, the whole of India is here. Say these sisters from different provinces, so there is a kind of emotional integration, otherwise they are just this is Karnataka, this is Maharashtra, this belongs to this. We should integrate it, so that emotional integration is also behind this (Usha di 2006).

Usha di is arguing for a dissipation of the difference in value of manual and intellectual labor, and by extension she is arguing that each person is of equal value. By engaging in the manual work of spinning and the upkeep of the ashram, the sisters are demonstrating a respect for both intellectual and manual labor (something that is often lacking in many societies).

By valuing manual labor, khadi is also a symbol of nonviolence: it *is* nonviolence in action. Usha di explicitly talks about how khadi circumvents the entire market economy that oppresses and suppresses the most vulnerable. Referring to the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Usha di expounds,

> in Gita, it is said that one who does manual labor, his life is innocent because he is not exploiting anybody. Otherwise, when I live on the market and when I go to the market to purchase this cloth, if it is not khadi cloth, if it is another cloth, then that mill owner, he is exploiting the labor. We are the part of that labor exploitation. So, when we do manual labor, we have least exploitation in our life because we earn by our own (Usha di 2006).

When the sisters make their own khadi, they know the source of their clothing. They are sure that no one was exploited in the making of their clothes. Reflected in this commitment not to exploit others is the sisters' belief in the true equality of all humanity and their ongoing efforts to work for Sarvodaya, the holistic uplifting of *all* humanity.

Contained in their notion of simple living and high thinking are threads of radical revolution. Gandhi utilized khadi to free and transform India. It was part of his plan for Hind Swaraj, Indian self-rule and self-sufficiency. The sisters' use of khadi is equally revolutionary. Their embrace of khadi and all it represents stands in stark contrast to the consumer-, capitalistic-dominant cultures of our times. Rather than accumulating as much as possible, the sisters are decreasing their possessions. Usha di says, "you can't have a spiritual life with all these materialisms around you. Do you want to have a material life or

do you want to have a spiritual life? That is the most important question." Wearing khadi is one of the ways in which the sisters are rejecting a "material life."

7. Application

Having briefly discussed how khadi captures the essence of the lives and thinking of the sisters of the Brahma Vidya Mandir, in this final section I ruminate on what we might learn from their narratives. As we consider the actions of the sisters, it is important that we translate their lessons into our own contexts. Simply mimicking what the sisters do in rural central India is neither practical nor edifying. I am not advocating that we all take up spinning and making our own khadi. For most of us, this would be impractical. However, with some adaptations, we can identify and apply principles embedded in their narratives in a variety of different settings.

First, the sisters choose to live in a way where there is a clear cohesiveness between their narrative and their worldview. They are conscious of their actions and the ramifications of them. Through their meditative practice and spinning, they cultivate mindfulness. They choose to live simply, not because of a lack of options or resources, but because by doing so, they demonstrate how one can live a meaningful and fulfilling life without all the trappings of materialism.

Though we might not make and wear khadi, many of us have the privilege of choosing how we want to live. How do we exercise this privilege? How mindful are we of our decisions and actions? How often do we examine the correlation between our theological and philosophical commitments and the choices we make? Aligning our personal narratives with what we think and believe, having integrity, is a choice most of us can make. It does not just happen. It is not inevitable. Regardless of whether we like it or not, our life is our message; our actions, our choices, demonstrate our priorities.

Secondly, the sisters' choice of khadi is related to their desire to live the in the most environmentally responsible way possible. Their examples encourage us to consider our relationships with the natural world and our use of natural resources. What are our responsibilities regarding the environment? Do we take seriously the concerns of climate change? If so, what are we doing to curb our use of natural resources, mitigate climate change, and decrease our contributions to pollution? In the current globally connected, consumerism-focused economic reality, attempting to live with our attention on our environmental impact can be expensive, overwhelming, and even paralyzing.[8] In the face of these huge, complex environmental challenges, do we give up in despair? Or do we move forward, mindfully taking on such complex challenges one at a time?

When dealing with global issues such as climate change, we should also keep in mind an important attitude of the sisters. They are not perfect, and perfection is not their goal. Doing their duty while not being attached to the fruits of their actions is one of their goals. This idea of nonattachment to the fruits of actions is a central teaching in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

> Be intent on action, not on the fruits of action; avoid attraction to the fruits and attachment to inaction. Perform actions, firm in discipline, relinquishing attachment; be impartial to failure and success—this equanimity is called discipline (Miller 1986).

Not being attached to the fruits of actions means we are to do our duty. We are to do what is right and not obsess over the success or failure of our actions.[9] In this context, if we believe it is our duty to be environmentally responsible, then we should act accordingly, regardless of whether it brings about a reversal in climate change or not. We act responsibly toward the natural world because it is the correct thing to do.

Third, intertwined in the sisters' use of khadi is their belief in the equality of all humanity. Because of their deep respect for all humanity, they work to be as inclusive as possible, and they avoid participating in systems that suppress and oppress the most vulnerable. Sarvodaya, the holistic uplifting of all, captures a narrative grounded in relationships. Today, "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" are important terms we hear in multiple contexts. Sarvodaya is a radical inclusion. It calls us to be mindful of the welfare of

everyone. Consider the implications for societies around the world if we were to implement this view of humanity. What would our global economies look like if everyone's life were valued equally? Would we have people working long hours in packing plants for less than poverty wages while the CEOs make millions of dollars?[10] If we have the privilege of purchasing clothes that cost more, but guarantee a living wage for the workers making the garment, would we pay the higher price? Sarvodaya challenges us to act in a manner that contributes to creating a world in which everyone can flourish.

Additionally, Sarvodaya broadens our focus from our personal actions to include larger systems and their impacts. What systemic changes do we need to make so that everyone, from all sections of societies around the world, would have the opportunity to live a full and meaningful life? The sisters' use of khadi is revolutionary, both in the way it opens the Sarvodaya door of radical inclusion, and in how it challenges much of the contemporary capitalist and consumerist narratives of most, if not all, global economies. These current economic systems are reliant on people consuming increasingly more and they are built primarily on the backs of the poorest and most vulnerable people around the world, and often there is little thought given to the use and abuse of the natural environment and resources.

8. Conclusions

The sisters of the Brahma Vidya Mandir ashram operate out of a worldview that does not have separate categories for religion and life. They are also living out the Gandhian principles of Ahimsa, Satyagraha, and Sarvodaya. As demonstrated above, Khadi is an illustrative example of how the sisters carry forward these commitments as they live in their ashram on a hill in rural, central India. Khadi captures multiple elements of their simple living and high thinking. Contained in their making and wearing of khadi are threads of revolutionary hope; woven throughout their narratives is a theology of revolutionary hope.

Through examining the examples of the sisters of this ashram, we are presented with a challenge to ask ourselves how we choose to live in our various contexts. Are we going to pick up the threads of revolutionary hope and have narratives in which everyone may flourish? The radical inclusion of Sarvodaya invites us to listen and to pay attention to what Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016) calls "Deep Stories, the stories that feelings tell." When we hear the deep stories of people from all segments of society, and when we act in a manner that compassionately includes the hopes and fears of multiple narratives, we will be part of a revolutionary narrative that can bring hope, justice, and compassion to the world.

In a mid-October 2021 airing of *On Being with Krista Tippett*, writer/activist Darnell Moore and dream hampton (Moore and dream hampton 2021) (writer/filmmaker, executive producer of *Surviving R. Kelly*) talked about hope. In their discussion, Moore quoted bell hooks' *Talking About a Revolution*: "Hope is essential to any political struggle for radical change when the overall social climate promotes disillusionment and despair." Skepticism is a common response to conversations about the power of hope, love, and Sarvodaya. When I present on the narratives of the sisters, people often say, "that's beautiful, but it is never going to happen," "it's just not practical," or "it's too aspirational." However, as indicated by the inseparable nature of the sisters' narrative and their theology, when we are talking about bringing hope to everyone—including those who have limited, if any, choices, and those who are the farthest from power and wealth—it is not aspirational, it is necessary for survival.

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Notes

1 In the ashram, all the sisters go by their first name followed by "di, tai, bhen" (sister). In India, as a sign of respect, women who are older than the speaker are referred to as sister ("di, tai, or bhen").

2 Usha di interview by the author, July 2006.

3 The Bhoodan Yagna is a Land Gift Movement that Vinoba began in 1951. Seeing it as an opportunity to combat poverty and landlessness in India, Vinoba walked from village to village throughout India for fourteen years, asking those who had land to give it to those who had none. (Kalindi tai 1994; Bhave 1955; Tennyson 1955).

4 A woman from France was a member for a number of years, and a woman from Japan has been a member since the 1970s. A few of the sisters joined the ashram after being university professors, while other members are illiterate.

5 My ethnographic project began by interviewing the sisters of the Brahma Vidya Mandir. Over a period of six years, it grew to include in-depth interviews with about one hundred people working for Sarvodaya and spanning three generations. To a person, wearing khadi was a priority.

6 M. K. Gandhi coined the term "Khadi." It was an important symbol and an integral part of his campaign to both free India from British rule and to work for Sarvodaya throughout the country (Gonsalves 2010, 2012).

7 All photographs were taken by the author with permissions.

8 For an engaging and insightful discussion, see (McFarland Taylor 2019).

9 This is not to say we should not reflect upon the results of our actions, assess them, and make changes accordingly. This instruction of nonattachment comes in the context of the importance of doing our duty, and for Vinoba and the sisters, our duty is Sarvodaya.

10 For example, Tyson Foods' top executives, with benefits and bonuses, each make between $2 million–$10.398 million a year. Tyson line employees make between $22,000–$60,000 a year (Tyson Foods, Inc. 2019; Souza 2019; Bureau of Labor and Statistics of US Gov 2019).

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