

# Swadeshi: True and False

*Excerpt from Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Art and Swadeshi.  
New Delhi: Munshiram Manohar Ltd., 1994-second edition.*

## **Swadeshi, True and False\***

All those who have studied the Industrial Arts of India unite in recognizing and deploring their profound decay, and in very many cases, their practical extinction. Investigation invariably shows that goods that ought to be, and once were, common in the market, are now only to be seen in museums. One hundred, or even fifty years ago, it would have been possible to fill many museums worthily with the everyday handiwork of Indian artisans: now this would be only possible after years of patient collecting in remote districts. During the nineteenth century India has in fact, ceased to excel in those Industrial arts which provided the bulk of her exports, the main source of her wealth (after agriculture), and of the refined luxury of her homes during a period of time that must be counted in millenniums.

During this period—if we are to judge from the wreckage of her Industrial arts remaining to us—we must rank the civilisation of India indeed highly, for it could have been truly said that in her homes, whether of rich or poor, there could be found nothing that was not either useful or beautiful. In exchange for this world of beauty that was our birthright, the nineteenth century has made of our country a 'dumping-ground' for all the vulgar superfluities of European overproduction; and all that the Swadeshi movement of the twentieth century has done is to provide us with many spurious imitations of these unlovely inutilities.

It could hardly have been otherwise, for behind the Swadeshi movement there is no serious and consistent ideal. Its leaders have had but one thought before them—to save money. The movement has lacked almost totally in those constructive elements which we meet with in similar movements in other countries, such as Denmark or Ireland. Never have I

seen in any Swadeshi literature the wish expressed to preserve Indian manufactures on account of their intrinsic excellence, or because the presence amongst us of these highly skilled craftsmen represented an important element in the national culture, or because these craftsmen still worked under conditions of life still infinitely superior, physically and spiritually, to those of the European factory-slaves.

Too often the leaders of our political movement have forgotten (as men forgot in the early days of the development of European industrialism) that elementary principle of statecraft, that men are of more account than things. They have forgotten that the goal of all material civilisation is not labour but leisure, and that industry without art only brutalises and degrades. For things then—things economic, political, temporary—they have been willing to undermine both our immemorial industrial culture, and to degrade the status and destroy the physique of those artisans who once served us so faithfully and who even now if we would let them would make our cities and our houses beautiful again. I know no sign more ominous for the future of the Indian civilisation, than our utter indifference to social industrial idealism, and the heartless callousness with which we have cast aside the services of those who built our homes, and clothed and wrought for us in the days before we learned to despise our own culture,— leaving them to eke out a precarious living by making petty trivialities -for tourists, curio-collectors, and for Anglo-Indian bungalows, or to drift into the ranks of menial labourers or factory hands. Do you think that we can thus degrade the status of so many men without impairing the vitality of our national life and without injuring the basis of its possible prosperity?

We, who think that we are educated and progressive, we, who attend conferences and sit on legislative councils, who are rulers of states, or earn more princely incomes in courts of law, we ourselves have despised and hated everything Indian, and it is by that hatred that we have destroyed our industries and degraded the status of our artisans. And when at last our pockets were touched—then so far from realising what we had done, we set ourselves to form Swadeshi companies for making enamelled cufflinks (with pansies on them), for dyeing yarn (with German dyes), or making uncomfortable furniture (for Anglo-Indians). We never thought that the fault

was in ourselves. We lived in caricatured English villas, and studied the latest fashion in collars and ties and sat on the verandahs of Collectors bungalows and strove to preserve our respectability by listening to gramophone records of the London music halls instead of living Indian singers—we learned to sit on chairs and eat with spoons and to adorn our walls with German oleographs and our floors with Brussels carpets: and then we thought to save our souls by taking shares in some Swadeshi company for making soap.

True Swadeshi is none of these things: it is a way of looking at life. It is essentially sincerity. Seek first this, learn once more the art of living, and you will find that our ancient civilisation, industrial no less than spiritual, will re-arise from the ashes of our vulgarity and parasitism of today.

I do not think we fully realise the depth of our present intellectual poverty. If everything produced in India during the nineteenth century were to be suddenly miraculously destroyed, the world would be very little the poorer. The creative force in us has died, because we had no faith in ourselves—we could only learn to be intellectual parasites: to make, as has been said, of our country a mere suburb of Birmingham and Paris. It is imperative that we should recognize our real position, if we could reconstruct our national life. To this end, years of patient labour in the field of National Education is needed. So long as this education is based on the assumption that all true light and learning must come from Europe, so long will the restoration of industrial prosperity for India be impossible.

The first thing that must always strike a critical visitor examining Indian work exposed for sale in shops, or at an Industrial exhibition, is the extraordinary and consistent contrast between old and modern work. The latter almost always shows marked degeneration in respect of technique or intention or both. The place of those things which used to be common but now are rare is taken by cheap substitutes and by imitations of the imported superfluities of European over-production. The most significant phenomenon is the change of application of all the more elaborate arts, such as

enamelling, wood carving, and embroidery, from the real service of the daily needs, domestic and ceremonial, of the people of the country, to the production of trinkets and curiosities for tourists and foreign markets. It is this fact which accounts for an often criticised feature in the modern work—the faulty construction or over-loading of ornaments which are so often combined with patient and devoted labour and the use of fine and traditional designs. One may instance the ill-fitting hinges of inlaid glove boxes: the elaborate carving of the tops of tables, making them useless as tables, exquisite embroidery for blouses applied to cheap materials which do not last, or worked in colours which do not wash. This state of affairs results from the facts that the craftsman does not use, and has little or nothing to do with persons who do use, glove-boxes, tables, and blouses, and there can be no serious change in the position of the Industrial arts of India until the present Indian boycott of the Indian craftsman is replaced by something more like that intelligent boycott of worthless importations from Europe (and their imitations made in India) which Lord Curzon so passionately advocated at Delhi.

No less than forty years ago Sir George Birdwood wrote “Indian Native Gentlemen and Ladies should make it a point of culture never to wear any clothing or ornaments but of native manufacture and strictly native design.” How we should have scoffed at this idea then! Even now there are Bengali gentlemen who bring home trunks full of English dresses for their wives after completing their studies at the English bar: and it is not ten years since the students of the Calcutta School of Art went on strike, and were strongly supported in doing so by the Bengali press, because an Englishman dared to think that real Indian art instead of second rate European might be made the basis of the teaching in the school. It is true that things have changed during the last ten years, and a change once begun progresses swiftly: but the amount of change is still insignificant, and we are only to a small extent less parasitic than the last generation. It is a marvel to me how any self-respecting people can endure for a day, not the system of government,—but the system of education from which we suffer, a system which is a far deeper and more perpetual insult to our culture than any of the incidents in railway trains of which we hear so much. The Education Court at the late United Provinces Exhibition, for instance was little more than a gigantic advertisement of English schoolmasters and Messrs

Macmillan. There was practically nothing Indian about it. It is not surprising that the products of such education do not care for Indian art. It would be more surprising if they did.

Let me now briefly analyse the chief causes of decline in Indian industrial art.

Every one knows that architecture is a synthesis of all the arts and that their prosperity is bound up with that of the art of building. Modern Indian architecture\*\* however, domestic or palatial, is at the very lowest ebb. The average modern house is a cross between a suburban villa and a Government barrack. The new palaces of most of the rulers of native States are, as Sir George Birdwood has remarked, like anything in the world except a habitation fit for kings. While European architecture is nominally the model, in India, "the essence of European architecture is supposed to consist in a reckless disregard of all recognized canons of ornament and proportion".

It is very true, as Mr. Lockwood Kipling remarked in the first volume of the *Journal of Indian Art*—"It is on the architecture of today that the preservation of Indian Art semblance of healthy life now hinges." Yet so far as I am aware it has never occurred to any Swadeshist politician to demand from Government that in public buildings Indian architecture should be the rule, and Indian architects employed or that the State should again patronise and foster Indian artistic industries. These things are still done in some of the native States: but not in all of these—Baroda, for instance, affords a conspicuously objectionable example of Anglicisation and total disregard of Indian artistic tradition. Nearly everywhere in India there are still living hereditary and most capable working architects— such as no other country in the world still possesses—but like other craftsmen they are being starved by neglect and forced to adopt menial or agricultural work for a bare living.

Living in pseudo-European homes naturally and logically involves and corresponds to the using of European furniture, clothes and finally, to an entire dependence on imported apparatus of material comfort and amusement—a dependence upon boxes of sardines and upon gramophones and on all that lies between them. In this process an accelerating touch is given by employing slightly educated Eurasian governesses to teach our daughters the use of knives and forks.

I should like to say in passing, that in speaking thus I do not mean in any way to disparage things European, as such. Nothing is further from my thoughts than that absurd notion which is expressed in the not uncommon saying, “that our ancestors were civilised when Europeans were ‘dressed’ in woad.” As a matter of fact early Keltic and Teutonic Europe was much more civilised in some respects than we are today—at least it cared more for creative and imaginative art. What I do wish to point out is that our imitations, whether in Swadeshi factories or in our lives, of things European are and must always be for ourselves socially and industrially disintegrating, and for the rest of the world wholly valueless.

Nor do I mean that we should never assimilate or adopt any foreign idea or custom. On the contrary I believe that even in such things as music and the plastic arts, and still more in sociology we have some things to learn from others, as well as to recover from our own past: only we do not show our progress in these things by taking to harmoniums, by buying German oleographs, or by adopting the crudest and least considered phases of a foreign culture. But let us recognise that by doing these things we offend both against the higher and the lower ideal of Swadeshi—the higher which is in our hearts, and the lower in our pockets.

Let us now study the process of disintegration further, passing from architecture, the main setting of our lives, to all the lesser elements of our environment.

“Not in Benares only” says Sir G. Watt, “but throughout India the fine old art designs that have been attained after centuries of evolution are being abandoned and models utterly unsuited and far inferior artistically are being substituted. The writer can confidently affirm that he found in at least fifty percent of the important silversmiths shops in India, the illustrated trade catalogues of European firms and stores being employed as the pattern books upon which their silver plate was being modelled.” The natural result is that when you want a Polo Trophy, you have to go to England for it—for we know that our Swadeshi imitations of European industrial art are never as good as the originals and are never likely to be. Swadeshi as we now understand it—i.e., erecting factories for naturalising European manufactures—is simply accepting for ourselves a permanent inferiority of environment, and irremediably lowering the standard of living amongst us.

The modern amongst us can already tolerate an environment of cheap hideousness and tawdry, expensive discomfort, which would have disgusted the poorest in the days of Hindu or Mughal civilisation.

Take Benares brass at Delhi: “all but one or two pieces were bad in design and worse in execution.”

Take enamelling: “Formerly every attention was given to effect, and a background or field colour was regularly employed, most frequently a rich creamy white. Within the past few decades this has been discontinued, and complex and intricate designs substituted in which it can hardly be said there is a field colour at all. The result is distinctly inferior and may be described as garish rather than artistic.”

A Benares Kinkhab manufacturer, asked to show a treasured pattern book, produced a sample book of English wallpapers— “This at once explained the monstrous degeneration perceived in the Benares Kinkhabs.”

The value of gold thread imported into India is now 44 lacs. It is much inferior to India handmade gold thread, now going out of use. The author of a monograph on Indian Gold lace remarks: "In such seemingly minor and unimportant details the true cause of the artistic degeneracy of Indian weaving is to be found."

Exactly the same conclusion may be drawn from the imports of aniline dyes. In such cases we actually pay money out of pocket, to ruin our own industrial arts.

It would be useless to multiply examples here: those who wish may find them in the pages of all, Indian or English, who have written upon the industrial arts of India. I think no one will deny that these Industrial arts are in a nearly hopeless state. No one can ultimately deny that the main cause of this is our own deficient artistic understanding. It is, I repeat, far more necessary to cease our own boycott of the Indian craftsman, than for us to carry on a boycott of foreign imports.

In attempting to establish factories for the imitation of European imported goods we overlook one thing—the relative value of men and things. True Swadeshi would have attempted to preserve the status of our skilled artisans and village craftsmen, for the sake of the value to our country of men as men. Already it is being recognized in Europe that the general substitution of machines for men must invariably lower the whole intellectual and moral status of the working population: and we need not hope to avoid this result by tinkering at compulsory education. A False Swadeshi does not object to crowding the craftsmen into factories, where drunkenness, physical degeneration and all other natural results of the factory system follow. One has but to read the reports of factory inspectors to understand—"The legal hours of rest for women are constantly exceeded:" "sanitary arrangements are horrible:" "children are often puny, probably owing to overwork." "Nearly every factory is a constant offender." Such are the facts recorded in the last report of the Director of Industries 11 the Punjab. The moral should be clear. Yet we find the members of the late Factory Commission lamenting the

absence of a pure factory class, totally severed from village life, in Western India. The whole endeavour of a True Swadeshi should be to restore, not to destroy, the organic life of the village communities. It is not that we learn too much from foreign countries. We learn too little. If we learnt more, we should not want to repeat the experiments in Laissez faire of early Victorian England.

To sum up our conclusions—

Who are the natural patrons of our Industrial Arts? Not tourists, I think you will agree. The sumptuary arts of India, the decline of which we are discussing, are those which naturally most depend, like architecture itself, on the tastes and patronage of the educated, aristocratic and wealthy classes amongst us and of the courts and have always so depended: and unless we can restore the fine aesthetic culture which these classes in India once possessed, we cannot hope that our Industrial Arts will flourish. Mr. Burns the other day remarked that out of two hundred wedding presents which he had the opportunity of seeing at an Indian wedding, only some sixteen were Indian in point of character and origin: and the same state of affairs may be observed in the houses of almost all our prosperous lawyers and Deputy Collectors. Now the situation is this—that a mere desire to save money for our country will never remedy this state of affairs, neither will a wish to achieve political revenge. But artistic education, the setting of men before things in our own estimation, and the ideal of nationality as service may achieve, what lesser motives cannot. What is necessary is that we should let the real love of our country allow us to realize that Her gifts are (with the rarest exceptions) really and intrinsically better than those which we can import—that our dyes, our handmade gold thread, our designs, our ways of dressing and building, our jewellery, our carpets and all that goes to make the daily environment of our lives are better than the things we import from Europe—more beautiful, more enduring, more vital in response and more a part of our real life. Then it will not be so difficult perhaps to spend a little more in the first instance on such things. But all this is not a matter of political platforms, it is simply and solely a matter of National Education, the sort of education that will help us some day to prefer a living singer to what an Indian friend of mine has very aptly called 'the voice of the living

dead'. Then we shall be saved not only the expense of importing gramophones, but all the bother of trying to make them in local factories, with indifferent success. This is a parable of all the other Industrial Arts.

Secondly, the great manufacturers can take care of themselves. Business men will not fail to discover where money can be made. It is hardly necessary for us to assist them in becoming millionaires by bringing to their aid the whole weight of Swadeshi sentimentality. We have only to see that they injure as little as possible the physique and morale of the workers. Temporary cheapness is no guarantee of ultimate value from the standpoint of national evolution or even of private advantage on the part of the individual purchaser. Swadeshi does not consist in imitating new productions recently imported—this may be left to the speculative businessman, who has his due place—but in restoring the status and the prosperity of the skilled artisan and the village craftsman. It is these artisans who most need the help of our national idealism. It is these skill craftsmen also whom we as a nation most need as members of our body politic. We have enough of agricultural labourers and are like to have too many factory hands, and perhaps too many lawyers and clerks. To assist the skilled artisan and the village craftsman may seem too simple, too unromantic a thing for nationalists to undertake. Even national education requires half a century to bear its fruits. Yet it is assuredly only by such personal activity and gradual recovery of social co-operation that an end so great as the restoration of our status amongst the nations of the world can be achieved. And it is almost waste of time to work for ends that may or may not be achieved in ten or fifteen years: the greatest work is done by those who scarcely look to see its fruits within their own lifetime.

\*Read at the Fifth Annual Industrial Conference, Allahabad, 1910.

\*\* I.e., architecture as seen in the modern cities and as patronised by the 'English educated'. In many parts of India a very fine tradition of building still survives; but it is being killed by neglect.

