

# Whose Knowledge Counts? Reinterpreting Gandhi for the Information Age

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To say that Mohandas K. Gandhi's ideas on truth, non-violence, and civil disobedience continue to be relevant is relatively uncontroversial. The same is not the case, however, with his economic ideas. *Khadi* (handspun cotton), *charkha* (spinning-wheel), and village industries seem anachronistic in the globalized economy and the "information age." This paper argues that Mahatma Gandhi is still a relevant economic thinker provided we reinterpret him for today's conditions and view his ideas through the lens of knowledge. To make this claim, it is first necessary to show that Gandhi was sensitive to the knowledge dimension of development. Second, it is important to establish the relevance of such a reinterpretation at this historical juncture. And third, it would be helpful to offer some specific remarks on what a contemporary Gandhian perspective on knowledge would look like.

Gandhi actively engaged in the "politics of knowledge." By this term I refer to struggles between contending ways of seeing, understanding, and changing the world. The politics of knowledge as a rule does not receive the explicit attention devoted to the politics of control over resource use or state policy. And yet the view may be advanced that knowledge politics—that is, struggles over *whose knowledge counts and whose doesn't*, who has scientific knowledge and who has only superstitions or "rules of thumb"—is an ever-present companion of material politics. I argue that Gandhi was very sensitive to the politics of knowledge that underlie material politics and that he waged a battle in this arena to realize his vision

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of economic development. Economic development, for Gandhi, is not merely an increase in per capita income, but a structural transformation in the economy consistent with the principles of locality (*swadeshi*), social justice (*sarvodaya*), and small-scale industry (*gramudyog*). This can only result from civilizational change; a rejection of the urban industrial civilization and its substitution by a village-centered economy and society based on the principles of *satya* (Truth) and *ahimsa* (non-violence). In Gandhi's writings and work we find a unique effort to utilize mass politics in order to effect such a civilizational change through the construction of a *lokavidya*-based economy.<sup>1</sup>

Although Gandhi was not a system builder and although his dictum that he did not believe in consistency<sup>2</sup> is often quoted, there is in fact remarkable coherence and consistency in his thought and action. Thus, we should not be surprised to learn that the decentralized, democratic vision that finds expression in ideas such as local production for local consumption as well as local governance (via *panchayats*, or village councils) can also be extended to the production and use of knowledge in society. A relatively underappreciated yet radical aspect of Gandhian (economic) thought is that, in addition to local production for the local market and local control over local resources, knowledge produced by the working people in the course of their ordinary life should form the basis of India's economic development. Beginning with his critique of "Western civilization" in *Hind Swaraj*<sup>3</sup> and continuing with hundreds of articles written over the course of four decades on all aspects of the village economy, Gandhi can be seen as building a case for a society that gives pride of place to *lokavidya*, the knowledge of the peasants, artisans, and *adivasis* (indigenous people). The idea of such a society was jettisoned when India embarked on its post-independence development path. Instead, even as Gandhian ideas were explicitly included in the first few Five Year Plans, the "commanding heights" of the economy were to be occupied by large-scale industry to be built with the help of imported technology and expertise and by national-level economic planning. Modern universities and research institutes were promoted as the preeminent sites of knowledge production. Development thinking at that time viewed knowledge produced in these institutions as superior knowledge. Not only that, but classical development theorists and practitioners saw *lokavidya* largely as

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superstition or traditional knowledge destined to be replaced by modern, scientific knowledge.

Starting in the late 1970s, and particularly since the 1980s, people's movements all over India have taken up the issue of local control over local resources and have found inspiration in Gandhian thought. However, this struggle is incomplete without the other aspect of his insight: that people's own knowledge, produced by them in the course of their daily existence, must be the foundation of the socio-economic order. This issue is only just starting to gain recognition. The idea that development can be inclusive only if attention is paid to people's knowledge has recently been championed by international institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and USAID. That international attention is now being paid to people's knowledge is, in part, a result of a global paradigm shift in thinking. The information revolution and the rise of neo-liberal capitalism have caused large changes in the way the global economy is managed. Knowledge has emerged as an important wealth- and income-generating asset both via knowledge-intensive commodities (such as software products and management/consulting services) and via rents generated by intellectual property. The knowledge question in Gandhian thought is thus timely, because the "industrial age" is rapidly giving way to the "knowledge age." "Production" and "science" are being replaced as the defining paradigms of the age by "knowledge" and the Internet. Since Gandhi worked and wrote during the heyday of modern industry and mass production, his alternatives were often presented in the form of village industry and decentralized production ("production by the masses rather than mass production"). To rediscover the significance of Gandhian economics today, we need to understand what Gandhi's views were on knowledge. In this way the discourse on the emerging "knowledge society"<sup>4</sup> can also be given a direction that is relevant to the vast majority of Indians, rather than the tiny elite occupied in its software and hi-tech sectors.

The concept of *lokavidya* has been advanced by Sunil Sahasrabudhey and Chitra Sahasrabudhey as a Gandhian approach to people's knowledge.<sup>5</sup> There are some key differences between *lokavidya* and the framework of traditional/indigenous knowledge being developed internationally. First, the concept is much broader in scope, encompassing not only knowledge of natural resources and ecosystems (the most commonly referred to type of traditional knowledge), but also artisanal knowledge, dietary

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and healthcare practices, modes of governance and dissent, and so on. Second, *lokavidya* is not static knowledge: for example, knowledge possessed by communities of artisans—who work with wood, clay, iron, plastic, and many other raw materials to produce articles of daily use, utensils, clothes, food items, toys, soap, even small machine parts—is dynamic and changes in accordance with the availability of raw material, market forces, technical progress, and so on. Finally, rather than emphasizing the epistemic differences between people's knowledge and scientific knowledge, the *lokavidya* perspective stresses the power relationships between knowledge systems and opens the possibility of a dialog between them.

*Lokavidya* is not marginal to Indian society. Even today, sixty-eight years after independence, over ninety percent of Indians work in the “informal economy.” Viewing Indian society through the lens of *lokavidya*, we discover that these working people, farmers, artisans, indigenous people, women, and small retailers satisfy their needs and society's needs largely with informal knowledge produced and transmitted outside of schools and universities. This knowledge is to be found everywhere in society. Yet it does not receive the recognition it deserves, and nor do *lokavidya*-holders receive adequate returns for their work. The informal economy is thus also the site of extreme poverty and exploitation. The dual knowledge-rich and resource-poor nature of the informal economy is further discussed below.

Finally, it should be stressed that while this paper argues in favor of a *lokavidya* perspective, the various knowledge systems in society must engage in open dialog with each other with the aim of producing a society based upon *satya* and *ahimsa*. This can only be achieved by giving *lokavidya* a status in society equal to other knowledge paradigms and *lokavidya*-holders a status equal to those educated in universities and by initiating a dialog between the various knowledge streams in society.<sup>6</sup>

### **Which Gandhi? Mass Politics, Civilizational Change, and *Lokavidya***

There are many Gandhis: Gandhi the saint, Gandhi the politician, Gandhi the philosopher, Gandhi the social reformer, Gandhi the religious thinker, Gandhi the pre-modern, Gandhi the non-modern, Gandhi the post-modern, even Gandhi the “running dog of imperialism.” And one could go on and

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on. So at the outset it would be well to clarify which Gandhi I am talking about. I am interested in the person who sought to use mass-based political mobilization to effect civilizational change, in part via the construction of an alternative economic system based upon *lokavidya*. My emphasis here is on the last attribute (“*lokavidya*”); however before we get there, let us briefly take each of the other attributes in turn.

It can be argued that Gandhian ideas gained the significance they did in large part because they were useful in the practical politics of resisting oppression and exploitation and of obtaining tangible if gradual political victories. This is not merely an instrumental reading of Gandhi. Rather, it serves to remind us that as with Karl Marx—so with Gandhi—if the theoretical ideas are no longer informed by and responsive to mass-based political movements, if they do not resonate with the dispossessed masses, then they risk losing relevance to society. Kishan Patnaik is of the opinion that “official Gandhism” in the post-independence era killed the vitality of the Gandhian political tradition, and in particular the dimension of resistance and dissent.<sup>7</sup> Even as the Gandhian vision of a decentralized polity and village-based economy was implemented, albeit in a top-down fashion, in state policy, largely in the form of support and subsidy to small-scale and cottage industry (by, for example, reserving products for manufacturing in this sector) and later in the *panchayat* system, Gandhian dissent based upon militant non-violence, once so threatening to those in power (whether foreign or native), seemed to lose steam after Gandhi’s death.<sup>8</sup> While this rings true of party or electoral politics, in the non-party political sphere, and in particular in the people’s movements, a new generation of Gandhi-inspired individuals has arisen and the synthesis between non-violent struggle and reconstruction (*sangharsh aur nirman*) that Gandhi sought is being revived. *Satyagraha* (“truth-force” or “soul-force”), Gandhi’s technique of non-violent but militant resistance, has emerged as a useful weapon in the contemporary struggles against displacement and dispossession. There is thus a concomitant growing need for Gandhian scholarship to connect with the practical applications of *satyagraha* and contemporary experiments in decentralized production and governance. It is the argument of this paper that, in part, the seeming irrelevance of Gandhi to the constructive as opposed to the protest dimension of development today is the result of seeing him purely as a champion of *khadi* and village industries, a position that seems outmoded and out

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of sync with the new India of cell phones and software firms. Recasting Gandhi in knowledge terms, we discover a new constructive significance for him.

It is generally accepted that Gandhi succeeded perhaps more than any other elite nationalist leader of the time in making the Indian National Congress a mass organization. But to what end were the masses mobilized? What was the goal of Gandhi's politics? A sensible answer might be independence from British rule. But even a first reading of *Hind Swaraj* shows that this is at best only partly true. In a chapter titled "What is Swaraj?," Gandhi writing as the "Editor" notes: "You and I and all Indians are impatient to obtain Swaraj, but *we are certainly not decided as to what it is*. To drive the English out of India is a thought heard from many mouths, but it does not seem that many have properly considered why it should be so."<sup>9</sup> In response to the "Reader's" comment that he wishes the English to leave India because they have impoverished the country and kept it in a state of slavery and that *swaraj* entails "our own navy, our army" and so on, Gandhi says: "You have well drawn the picture. In effect it means this: that we want English rule without the Englishman.... This is not the Swaraj that I want."<sup>10</sup> What then is Gandhi's conception of *swaraj*? In the chapter, "How Can India Become Free?," Gandhi notes:

Now you will have seen that it is not necessary for us to have as our goal the expulsion of the English. *If the English become Indianised, we can accommodate them*. If they wish to remain in India along with their civilisation, there is no room for them. It lies with us to bring about such a state of things.<sup>11</sup>

Gandhi is concerned that mere political independence without a more fundamental questioning of industrial civilization, which enslaves India, is wholly inadequate. He makes the point forcefully elsewhere:

God forbid that India should ever take [to] industrialism after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island Kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If the entire nation of 300 [now over 1000] millions took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.<sup>12</sup>

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Clearly, then, *swaraj* is not political independence, but rather civilizational change. The explicit critique of modernity or Western civilization and the implicit critique of modern science in *Hind Swaraj*, as well as Gandhi's later writings, is well appreciated by many Gandhi scholars.<sup>13</sup> Sunil Sahasrabudhey goes further and argues that the critique of science, and in particular of its hegemonic role in the world of knowledge, is in fact central to Gandhi's thought.<sup>14</sup> For Gandhi, the practical corollary of this challenge to modern science is, in the words of Patnaik, that "the mode of industrialization is a central and fundamental factor in carrying out civilizational change."<sup>15</sup> Thus, we find that Gandhi's energies were directed at least as much towards economic renewal and development as towards formal independence from British rule.<sup>16</sup> And in an inversion of the usual nationalist line, economic development took precedence over political independence.<sup>17</sup>

This brings us to the final point. Gandhi made people's knowledge a vital element of his program of change. Economic development was to be achieved through the organized, non-violent strength of the people themselves, *drawing to the extent possible upon the practices and beliefs of India's ordinary citizens rather than the knowledge of experts*. While it is well understood that Gandhi's economic and political impulse was to decentralize rather than centralize, and village industries and *panchayats*, two cornerstones of Gandhian economics and polity, are testaments to this fact, the democratic impulse went further than this. Decentralization of production and power is integrated into a *decentralization of knowledge production and use*. Thus, speaking of *khadi*, Gandhi notes: "It must be taken with all its implications. It means a wholesale Swadeshi mentality, a determination to find all the necessities of life in India and that too through the *labor and intellect* of the villagers."<sup>18</sup>

*Khadi* (indigenous technology) is not to be championed only because it is indigenous, nor is tradition to be preserved for its own sake. Rather, the emphasis is also on knowledge production and use by and for the people. By this interpretation, *swadeshi* does not imply only material self-reliance, but also a reliance on local knowledge. (And just as material self-reliance or self-sufficiency is not the same as isolation or autarky in the material sphere, so also a reliance on local knowledge is not the same as isolationism in the sphere of ideas.) To take another example, commenting on the use of machinery (or technology in modern parlance) in village industry,

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Gandhi says, “we have to concentrate on the village being self-contained, manufacturing mainly for use. Provided this character of the industry is maintained, there would be no objection to villagers using even the modern machines and tools that they can make and can afford to use.”<sup>19</sup>

However, unlike nativist or indigenist discourse of the Right, knowledge is not to be treated as sacrosanct merely because it is traditional. Rather, it is to be improved and built upon as well as discarded if found to be inadequate. Patnaik appreciates this aspect of Gandhi’s thought when he writes:

For Gandhi...the mode of industrialization is a central and fundamental factor in carrying out civilizational change, and this means making new inventions. [But] the invention of useful machines has become the provenance of the state or of big business. If those scientists who are not associated with the industrial or state institutions make common cause with the visionaries and revolutionaries who are engaged in the task of civilizational change, only then can a new science be created and only then can people-centered technology be invented.<sup>20</sup>

Although Gandhi does not speak explicitly of the importance of *loka-vidya* or the relationship between people’s knowledge and modern science, his intense interest in the matter can easily be inferred from extensive writings on *khadi* and other village industries, as well as writings on health, hygiene, diet, and so on. These works have traditionally been interpreted as a part of his village-centered view of the world and his emphasis on dispersed, labor-intensive, rather than capital-intensive (and labor-displacing), industrialization.<sup>21</sup> This interpretation is undoubtedly correct. However, to this, I would like to add a knowledge dimension. The significance of these industries is not only that they are labor intensive or village based, but also that *their knowledge basis is itself dispersed and widely available to the people to use and modify according to their changing needs*. For example, in singling out spinning, among its other attributes, Gandhi notes that “it is known to the thousands” and that “it is easily learnt.”<sup>22</sup> Conversely, Gandhi ties the destruction of *khadi* to the deterioration of knowledge: “Since the wanton destruction of this central village industry and the allied handicrafts, *intelligence and brightness have fled from the villages*, leaving them inane, lustreless, and reduced

almost to the state of their ill-kept cattle.”<sup>23</sup>

However, as mentioned earlier, traditional practices are not merely for “museumizing” or preserving intact. There is nothing particularly holy in, say, soap and paper manufacturing practices from Gandhi’s time. Rather, we must build on the *current state* of knowledge among the people by recognizing and supporting it. “As to which of the extinct or moribund village industries and crafts could be revived, we could not be sure until we sat down in the midst of the villages to investigate, to tabulate and classify. But I picked up two things of the most vital importance: articles of diet and articles of dress.”<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, recent National Sample Survey data on employment in the “unorganised manufacturing sector” (that is, small-scale industry) show that “articles of diet and articles of dress” (that is, food and textile industries) still account for nearly 35 percent of employment in informal industry.<sup>25</sup>

While this paper’s focus on economic development implies greater emphasis on *lokavidya* in economic activity, clearly the concept is not so limited. To take just one other example in passing, language is a vital dimension of knowledge production and distribution. Gandhi speaks extensively on the importance of language and recognizes the crucial role it plays in subjugating a people and breaking their systems of knowledge. Significantly, in *Hind Swaraj* he reaches for an analogy from Britain itself and points to the imposition of the English language on the Welsh people. Attacking English on the grounds that it is a language used to keep the masses in ignorance, he alleges, “Our love of the English language in preference to our own mother tongue has caused a deep chasm between the educated and politically-minded classes and the masses.”<sup>26</sup>

Of course, his immediate political interest here is to enable the masses to understand political strategy adopted by the Indian National Congress; however, I believe there is coherence between Gandhi’s views on knowledge and his views on language. One may counter here that Gandhi’s bold claim in *Hind Swaraj* that “to give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them,”<sup>27</sup> is no longer relevant today when access to an English education is empowering previously excluded sections of Indian society and English-speaking politicians are being eclipsed by those proudly speaking their own languages. However, despite major changes in Indian society which have resulted in both a reduction in the importance of English in the public sphere and an increase in the number of people

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who can speak or understand some English, the chasm that Gandhi refers to still exists today. And an inability to speak good English remains synonymous with lack of learning—lack of knowledge. Further, Gandhi recognizes that this chasm impedes the flow of knowledge which is key to keeping any knowledge system dynamic and relevant. Thus,

If during the last fifty years we had been educated through the vernaculars, our elders and our servants and our neighbours would have partaken of our knowledge; the discoveries of a Bose or a Ray<sup>28</sup> would have been household treasures as are the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.<sup>29</sup>

This quote is important in another regard. It demonstrates that Gandhi views *lokavidya* not as “poor people’s knowledge” only good for generating simple livelihoods, but as a dynamic body of knowledge necessary for the good life.

To sum up, one may assert that Gandhi’s thought already embodies exactly what Tariq Banuri calls for in his critique of modernization theory:

The popular and intellectual resistance to processes favoring centralization of authority, power, and knowledge indicate that a vision of the future in the Third World must explicitly be one of a decentralized polity, economy, and society. In addition to the obvious forms of political and economic decentralization, there is also a need for what may be termed epistemological decentralization.<sup>30</sup>

The most visible symbol of “epistemological decentralization” was the *charkha*. Gandhi was widely criticized for making a fetish out of the *charkha*.<sup>31</sup> But by choosing it as a symbol of his movement, he once again displayed sensitivity to knowledge politics. As a symbol of *lokavidya*, the *charkha* indicated that the movement’s political center of gravity was in the villages (what Gandhi referred to as “being village-minded”) and that it celebrated knowledge that was found among the people. When he says that “Swaraj is impossible without the Charkha,”<sup>32</sup> is not Gandhi implying in part that *lokavidya* must be the foundation of the new society?

The *charkha* marks a significant departure from mass political movements based on an urban industrial vanguard. This is not, however, to

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imply that leadership or vanguardism were absent in Gandhi's movement: the respect for people's knowledge and their capacity to make up their own minds is reflected in Gandhi's special variety of "moral vanguardism." Akeel Bilgrami notes:

In Gandhi there was not a trace of [the] vanguard mentality of a Lenin. He did indeed think that his "satyagrahis"—the non-violent activists whom he described, with that term, as "seekers of truth"—would provide leadership which the masses would follow, but it was absolutely crucial to him that these were not to be the vanguard of a revolutionary party along Leninist lines. They were to be thought of along entirely different lines, they were to be moral exemplars, not ideologues who claimed to know history and its forward movement better than the peasants to whom they were giving the lead.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, while Gandhi is clearly not opposed to leadership, his conception of a leader is someone who derives authority from her self-discipline and moral vision, not superior knowledge of objective reality (which is the orthodox Marxist line). Perhaps another way to put it is that she *knows* as much as the next person, but can better hear her own inner voice.

Before we go any further, it is necessary to confront two criticisms of the view being offered here. As is often the case for Gandhi, the criticisms accuse him of mutually contradictory follies, that of being populist and elitist at the same time. Gandhi's view is that *swaraj* comes "not by the acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is...abused."<sup>34</sup> Thus, one allegation is that his ideas are "unrealistic," in part because they are too populist and they place too much trust in "ignorant villagers." This view is a reflection of the same elite bias that informs not only development policy, but also much political organizing on the Right and the Left. But in this context it is India's educated elite, who often labeled Gandhi as a utopian dreamer, which emerges as the holder of the unrealistic position that the nationalist elite would share power with the masses once India gained freedom. Gandhi foresaw that this would not happen unless the last woman had acquired "the capacity...to resist authority when...abused."

On the other hand, Benjamin Zachariah has mounted a criticism of the view that Gandhi was anti-elitist:

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Gandhian arguments have in recent times been supported for being more culturally sensitive and less elitist than those of the “socialists” in India, or even claimed by “socialists” as a form of culturally sensitive and participatory “socialism.” This view is not borne out by the writings of Gandhi or the Gandhians. Gandhians took upon themselves the task of convincing the “masses” of what was good for them, and the right to guide the “masses” to the correct moral and material goals.<sup>35</sup>

As Gandhi’s emphasis on maintaining discipline in the ranks during *satyagraha* agitations shows, there is truth in Zachariah’s claim. However, pointing to Bilgrami’s moral exemplars, one can hypothesize that the mode of “convincing the masses” need not necessarily be inconsistent with *satya* and *ahimsa*. While there is room for disagreement on how much autonomy the masses had under Gandhi’s leadership as opposed to other mass movements, the issue is not limited to an academic debate on whether Gandhi was anti-elitist or just a different kind of elitist. Rather, the claim here is that of the various leadership-based mass political movements that India has seen, the one led by Gandhi’s vision is very sensitive to issues of vanguardism and elitism. Further, it offers a substantial body of writings as well as practices on which to construct a twenty-first-century knowledge politics of the people.

### **The Knowledge Question in Development, and the Knowledge Society**

Having made a case for treating Gandhi as a theorist and practitioner of knowledge politics and a champion of *lokavidya*, I want to next focus on the “fall and rise of *lokavidya*” in development discourse. This will make the relevance of Gandhi’s position on the issue clear.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the debate over the economic trajectory to be followed by independent India was a heated one in elite and popular circles.<sup>36</sup> This debate took place in the context of nearly two centuries of English rule, which had not only impoverished the country economically and enslaved it politically, but had also created an upheaval in the world of knowledge. K.C. Bhattacharya’s call for a decolonization of the mind or “Swaraj in Ideas” was a response to this upheaval,<sup>37</sup> and it directly addressed the contemporary colonized mindset of the Indian intelligentsia which had been taught to view its indigenous traditions of knowledge

as inferior to those introduced by the Europeans. In this atmosphere, Indian peasants, artisans, women, indigenous people, and the overwhelming majority of the working people were doubly condemned: impoverished materially and seen as impoverished epistemically. The material impoverishment was proof of epistemic bankruptcy. How could a people in such abject poverty possess any knowledge of value? A modern and forward-looking society could not be based on the practices of backward peasants and artisans.

That people-centered economic development should rely, even in part, on people's own knowledge was thus a very controversial idea. For example, Jawaharlal Nehru, though in many ways more questioning of traditional hierarchies than Gandhi, did not appreciate Gandhi's radical impulse with respect to people's knowledge. Contrast Gandhi's assertions that "The moment you talk to them (the Indian peasants) and they begin to speak, you will find wisdom drops from their lips. Behind the crude exterior you will find a deep reservoir of spirituality. I call this culture..." and that "If I have my say, our Governor-General and our Premier would be drawn from the *Kisans* [peasants],"<sup>38</sup> to Nehru's:

I do not understand why a village should necessarily embody truth and non-violence. A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment. Narrow-minded people are much more likely to be untruthful and violent.<sup>39</sup>

As is well known, ultimately Nehru's vision guided economic policy in independent India to a much larger extent than Gandhi's.<sup>40</sup> The then-recent success of Soviet central planning in achieving spectacular rates of economic growth and transforming Russia from a largely agricultural economy into a major industrial power weighed much more strongly with India's planners than did Gandhi's vision of a village-centered economy.

On the eve of India's decolonization in 1947, Gandhi's village-based economy, although never particularly favored by the Congress elite, was still a credible alternative. However, the central question in development—is economic development (or "modernization") in the European style desirable or even possible for India?, a question raised most forcefully by Gandhi in his writings—was sidestepped. The mode of development was

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deemed not to be an issue in need of political or democratic resolution, but instead a provenance of technical and bureaucratic experts. As Partha Chatterjee notes, the *political* struggle between Nehruvian or planning-centered and Gandhian or decentralized-communitarian visions of economic development was resolved largely by displacing it onto a *scientific-bureaucratic* terrain.<sup>41</sup> An appropriate symbol for this is the resignation from the pre-independence National Planning Commission of J.C. Kumarappa, the “Gandhian voice” on the commission, after “virtually every other member had disagreed with his views.”<sup>42</sup> The Gandhians on the Commission were advocates of village or cottage industry as well as decentralized development, and they came into conflict with the proponents of heavy industry and state-directed, national-level economic planning along the Soviet model. In retrospect, using the knowledge lens, we may argue that the struggle was not only between cottage industry and heavy industry, but also between people’s knowledge and elite knowledge.

Although many of the pioneers of development economics—Arthur Lewis, Albert O. Hirschman, and Ragnar Nurkse, to name just a few—thought of development in terms of utilizing more effectively the hidden or potential resources in developing societies, the resources in question were usually labor and nature, not knowledge in society. Knowledge was the provenance of (Western-trained) experts who were assumed to know best the appropriate pattern of resource allocation and appropriate technology. Although from the earliest days of economic planning in India it was recognized that community-level economic development was key to poverty alleviation and although Gandhian ideas were indeed expressed in official policy documents, most development economists and policy-makers were convinced that only a large-scale, centralized, capital-intensive push towards industrialization could lead India down the path of economic development, itself defined, as compared to Gandhi’s vision, fairly narrowly as either a rise in per capita income or a structural transition from a pre-dominantly agricultural to a predominantly industrial economy (the so-called “big push” and “great spurt” theories). The body of thought underlying this massive social engineering project undertaken in the name of the world’s poorest in the 1940s and 1950s went by the name of modernization theory.

However, by the 1970s, this development model had come to be challenged. V.M. Dandekar and Nilakantha Rath’s pioneering study concluded

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that not only was economic growth slow and unsatisfactory (around 3 percent per annum) under the aegis of the first three Five Year Plans, but further that the gains were monopolized by the upper-middle and richer sections of Indian society, so much so that economic development in the 1960s did not benefit the poorest 40 percent of the population at all.<sup>43</sup> As disillusionment with economic planning grew and Keynesian economics on which planning was based itself entered a global crisis, India was not immune to the tidal wave of neo-liberalism. Starting with the 1980s and at a rapid rate since the reforms of 1991, the Indian economy is being restructured and is transitioning from a closed to an open economy.<sup>44</sup> Despite a decade or more of reforms and market-led economic development, the poverty rate still stands at 30 percent (albeit reduced from 50 percent in the 1970s) and the Gini coefficient which measures economic inequality has risen from 28–29 to 35–36 (rural and urban respectively).<sup>45</sup> According to the latest World Bank estimates nearly 75 percent of Indians (over 800 million people) live on an income of two dollars a day or less.<sup>46</sup> And as I will elaborate in the next section, even today only about 27 million people, or 7 to 8 percent of the total workforce, are employed in the “formal sector” (that is, the public sector and organized private sector) with some hope of job security, retirement benefits, and so on. The rest of the non-agricultural workforce, engaged in a wide variety of industrial and service activities, earns its livelihood in the urban and rural “informal sector” with low incomes and precarious working conditions. As Gandhi had feared, even though modern industry increased its share of gross domestic product, it did not employ a correspondingly larger population. And as a consequence, agriculture, with a decreasing share of GDP, supports a more than proportionate burden of the population. To compound the problem, even as it has provided secure, protected jobs at a decent wage to only 7 to 8 percent of the population, the development of capital-intensive and resource-hungry modern industry has led to the forced displacement of 25 to 50 million people since 1951.<sup>47</sup> Of these, between 1950 and 1991, only 25 percent have been rehabilitated, leaving aside questions regarding what constitutes adequate compensation. During the same period, 30 to 50 percent of common property resources (forests, waters, land) have been depleted. N.S. Jodha finds that traditional common property resource management (an institution that Gandhi and Gandhi-inspired social movements fought to preserve) has collapsed in 90 percent

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of the villages surveyed.<sup>48</sup> In short, in keeping with Gandhi's oft-stated fears, modern industry has everywhere broken down traditional economies even as it has failed to provide livelihoods for those displaced from their traditional sources of subsistence.

Since the 1970s, the "expert-bias" as well as the Eurocentrism of development economics and of modernization theory has been the subject of criticism of both scholars and activists.<sup>49</sup> It is not necessary to rehearse these critiques here, but suffice to say that many factors contributed to this: the realization that the Western model of the mass production, mass consumption society was unsustainable ecologically, that large social and political problems accompanied development; and the West's own reservations regarding the psychological and physiological costs of development (in the form of alienation, depression, anxiety and stress, obesity, heart disease, and so forth). These facts have resulted in a challenge to both the planning and the neo-liberal models of development. These models have been faulted for neglecting resource management regimes, governance structures, and other types of knowledge that exist with ordinary people, the supposed beneficiaries of development. Through the 1980s, and particularly in the 1990s, a body of literature has developed around the idea that modern scientific knowledge is not the only type of knowledge relevant to the development process. The "new idea" is that communities all over the world have a vast store of knowledge relating to biodiversity, natural resource management, and medicinal herbs, which can be used in fostering their own development. In this literature, indigenous (or traditional or local) knowledge is supposed to be location and/or culture specific, generated within communities and forming the basis for survival and day-to-day activity; it is predominantly rural, oral, and not systematically documented. Formal scientific knowledge, by contrast, is university or research laboratory based; it is dependent on modern science, urban, and systematized.<sup>50</sup>

One indication of the disillusionment with the top-down central planning model is the widespread use of the notion of "participatory development." However shallow may be the use of this term by institutions such as the World Bank, the term itself communicates an important truth about the process of development. The top-down planning model was grounded in an implicit view of *knowledge scarcity*. The formal institutions of development (the state and its organs, universities, research institutes, and inter-

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national development institutions) were the centers of knowledge production amidst a sea of ignorance of the common people on how best to utilize a society's resources. But the model based on knowledge scarcity is increasingly giving way to recognition of *knowledge abundance*.<sup>51</sup> The "targets" or "beneficiaries" of development programs are being recognized as bearers of knowledge relevant or even crucial to the development process.

Seeing the development process or its failure in knowledge terms is not restricted to the global academy or to international agencies alone. Sanjay Sangvai of the National Alliance of People's Movements notes that the challenge for the new social movements "has been to counter the new paradigm of modernism and development by proposing alternatives that are not 'archaic or traditional' but rather rely greatly on local cultures, initiatives and knowledge as key driving forces."<sup>52</sup> Taking the knowledge dimension head on, he comments:

The conventional development model is established on the notion that there exists only one linear knowledge base. The new consciousness questions its supremacy and validity itself....The appreciation of plurality of knowledge, of every community and group...is replacing the hegemonic concept of "knowledge." Limiting the vast spectrum of knowledge due to the *colonial or brahminical approach*, we are deprived of a rich and varied world of knowledge, expressions and production processes that common people developed.<sup>53</sup>

Significantly, Sangvai contrasts people's knowledge (what we are calling *lokavidya* here) with *both* the colonial (or modern scientific) and the *brahminical* (or elite traditional) knowledge systems. Such a stance acknowledges that working people's knowledge in the erstwhile colonies has been twice denigrated, by the system of caste hierarchy as well as by the modern hierarchy set up between science and other types of knowledge.

The current trend in both "top-down" and "bottom-up" development thinking highlighting participatory local development and the use of people's knowledge offers a sharp contrast to the thinking during the hey-day of modernization and planning. While there is much room for debate on exactly how participatory a particular development project may or may not be, there is no doubt that a major shift is underway.<sup>54</sup>

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This is the replacement of the industrial age by the knowledge/information age. In the past two or three decades, a number of authors have argued that large economic, cultural, political, and epistemic shifts have occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century. Several terms are used to describe the new society: “post-industrial society,” “post-modern age,” “information age,” “knowledge society,” “network society,” “informational capitalism,” “cognitive capitalism,” and so on.<sup>55</sup> Two major developments, both initiated in the 1970s, mark the transition from an “age of industry” to an “age of knowledge.” The first development is the demise of the Keynesian welfare state (which represented state-managed capitalism, the repression of finance capital, large vertically integrated production, deep managerial hierarchies, and capital-labor accord) and its replacement by the neo-liberal regime supported by a belief in the efficiency of free markets, profit-led rather than wage-led growth, the rise of finance capitalism, and a transition from centralized, bureaucratic corporations to decentralized, flexible production. The second development is the much-celebrated revolution in information and communication technologies. Unprecedented advances in these technologies have made possible a type of global economy that allows extraction of surplus value, not only through global trade in commodities, but also through the construction of international commodity chains that globalize production itself. As agriculture was transformed according to the logic of industry (mass production, capital intensive techniques, and world markets) in the industrial age, so also industry is being transformed per the network logic of informational and knowledge flows in the age of knowledge.<sup>56</sup>

As the paradigm of production and the use of science to massively increase productive forces defined the age of industry in the first half of the twentieth century, so the paradigm of knowledge and the use of the Internet to organize knowledge defines the age of knowledge in the second half.<sup>57</sup> Arguably one may even assert that science, industry, and production are no longer the paradigms that define our times. Their place has been taken by knowledge and the Internet. In the new knowledge society which is said to have emerged in the industrialized countries, the majority of the workforce labors in the services sector, not in the production of tangible goods (agriculture and industry). “What counts is not raw muscle power, or energy, but information.”<sup>58</sup> Production of information, signals, symbols, and images assumes new and greater importance. Knowledge is

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seen as the principal force of production and increasingly becomes a commodity to be bought and sold in the market. In a recent UNESCO report, *Towards Knowledge Societies*, we find:

The knowledge economy is a particular knowledge-driven stage of capitalist development...succeeding a phase marked by the accumulation of physical capital....The wealth created is being measured less on the output of work itself, measurable and quantifiable, and more and more on the general level of science and the progress of technology.<sup>59</sup>

It is not necessary to dwell on the various critiques, mostly justified, of the celebratory narrative of the new knowledge society.<sup>60</sup> For our purposes it is worth recognizing that a major shift in political economy and in discourse is underway across the world, as seen, for example, in the formation of the National Knowledge Commission of India, set up “with the objective of transforming India into a knowledge society.”<sup>61</sup> In part, this shift is reflected in the new-found importance of people’s knowledge. The hierarchy between scientific and non-scientific knowledge that went almost unchallenged in the first half of the twentieth century has now come under attack. All across the world there is a growing interest in knowledge traditions and paradigms that were previously considered non-legitimate or non-scientific.

Advances in information and communication technologies, and in particular the Internet, have contributed to the visibility of these systems. Unlike traditional methods of knowledge distribution, such as universities, scholarly journals, and books, the Internet functions in a far more decentralized and “un-policed” manner. The result has been that slowly but surely, knowledge produced in modern institutions is no longer being viewed as the sole paradigm of knowledge. Or to put it another way, universities and research laboratories, once the exclusive preserve of science, have begun to acknowledge and interact with other knowledge paradigms. The resurgence of knowledge previously considered unscientific can be seen in the visibility enjoyed by alternative and holistic medicine, organic and small farming, traditional knowledge of sustainable resource management, new world markets for artisanal crafts, and so on. In the scholarly and policy literature, a plethora of terms, such as “traditional knowledge,” “indigenous knowledge,” “people’s knowledge,”

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“local knowledge,” and so on, proliferate as we attempt to define knowledge in society that is not produced within the paradigm of modern science or in the conventionally identified institutions of knowledge production.

However, this new-found recognition has come at a price. J. Michael Finger notes:

To the extent that the international community has paid attention to knowledge in developing countries, it has focused on two issues:

- The defense of “traditional knowledge” against misappropriation by industrial country interests.
- The policing of “biopiracy” on the part of industrial country interests, that is, exploitation of the biodiversity that exists in developing countries to develop agricultural products, healthcare products, and so forth, without proper compensation to the “traditional communities” that first discovered the usefulness of such genetic material.<sup>62</sup>

Further, the problems inherent in commoditizing knowledge, which is a public good, are further compounded in the case of *lokavidya*, since a key difference between *lokavidya* and knowledge produced in the formal sector is that a given type of *lokavidya* may be “owned” and practiced by a community of producers that has no legal status, making it difficult for private property rights to be accorded to it. As a consequence, a vigorous debate currently rages over the protection of *lokavidya* from appropriation via an appropriate regime of intellectual property rights. One attempt aimed at preventing illegitimate patents by pharmaceutical and other industries has been to construct online databases for traditional knowledge to make this information available as prior art to patent-granting agencies.<sup>63</sup> Critics have noted that online databases may increase rather than decrease the threat of appropriation. The debate goes on, and it clearly illustrates that the recognition being enjoyed by *lokavidya* in the knowledge age is not an unmixed blessing.

### ***Lokavidya*: A Gandhian Perspective on Knowledge**

Notwithstanding the new challenges posed by the Internet, mainstream thinking on sustainable development has acknowledged that “poor people’s knowledge”<sup>64</sup> should play an essential role in their own development.

However, a significant proportion of this literature on knowledge remains apolitical,<sup>65</sup> in that it stays away from issues of power relations between knowledge systems and between holders of different types of knowledge. Knowledge is often conceptualized either as a “bag of tools” to be applied to development problems as needed or as an asset to be used in income-generating activity. For people’s knowledge to be a force for a people-centered development path, the narrow, techno-centric or economic approach to knowledge needs to be transcended. Gandhi was one of the few modern thinkers who rejected the strict hierarchy between modern scientific knowledge and traditional knowledge and refused to accord to science the place of privilege it claimed for itself.<sup>66</sup> A more politically significant Gandhian concept of knowledge would recognize that knowledge is not merely a bag of tools or a revenue-generating asset. Knowledge is also self-determination, empowerment, and dignity. Knowledge belongs to a worldview that is itself the product of a particular social organization, a culture, a history, an ecology. Thus, when we valorize local knowledge or traditional knowledge, even as the conditions of existence of the community that has produced that knowledge are slowly eroded, we also erode the basis of production of such knowledge in the future. This vital link between production, autonomy, economy, and knowledge, which is expressed in Gandhi’s thinking as an insistence on *lokavidya*-based industry and local economy, is in need of emphasis.

The Gandhian concept of *lokavidya* differs from the World Bank conception of indigenous and traditional knowledge in other major respects.<sup>67</sup> First, the term “traditional” sets up a linear timeline along which societies initially possess traditional knowledge which is later superseded by (more accurate) scientific knowledge. Gandhi, of course, would reject any such timeline, not because he did not believe in improvement of the human condition or in progress, but because he redefined progress in such a manner as to call into question the claims to superiority made by Western civilization on the basis of modern science.<sup>68</sup> Further, calling something “traditional knowledge” generates a static picture which goes against the inherently dynamic character of knowledge, which always changes in content to adapt to changing conditions. For Gandhi, as we saw earlier, “tradition” was a living, changing thing. Tradition was useless if it was not capable of changing in order to meet the challenges of the day.

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Second, closely linked to the linear view where traditional knowledge is replaced by scientific knowledge, an opposition between traditional/indigenous and scientific knowledge, based on the practice of knowledge production, is commonly invoked. In this conception, traditional knowledge is unsystematic or informal and rule of thumb, while scientific knowledge is systematic and based upon hypothesis testing, use of appropriate controls, and experimental method. The Gandhian perspective does not deny that such difference may exist, but it puts the focus on the relationship of a given body of knowledge to the vast majority of the working people. And it makes the controversial claim that historically science has stood as often in opposition to the masses as it has stood for them, while *lokavidya* has consistently served their interest but has not been recognized as such.

Third, as alluded to earlier, instead of creating categories of knowledge or knowledge systems based upon the identities of the knowledge-holding group (traditional or indigenous or even “poor people”), we need categories that recognize the power relationships that govern the politics of knowledge. Brij Kothari suggests the use of the term “subaltern knowledge” to embody “a central condition of many LKs [local knowledges] *vis-à-vis* the scientific/Western knowledge establishment—that of being marginalized but resisting or with the potential to resist this process.” This is needed because “more benign terms in the literature (IK [indigenous knowledge], LK, Rural Peoples’ Knowledge..., etc.) fail to make this condition explicit.”<sup>69</sup> The term “*lokavidya*” suggests both the quality of “subalternness” as well as the quality of abundance.<sup>70</sup> As regards the relationship between power and knowledge, in the Gandhian tradition we have available to us the powerful criterion of *sarvodaya*, or social justice, and the related concept of the “last (wo)man.” As with any other issue, in order to construct a Gandhian theory of knowledge production and use, one must recall Gandhi’s talisman: “Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest [wo]man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to [her].... Will it restore [her]...control over [her]...own life and destiny...?”<sup>71</sup>

The knowledge implications of this talisman are worth exploring a little further and reveal the difference between traditional knowledge and *lokavidya*. In the Indian context, the elaborate and ancient system of (Brahmanical) knowledge designed to disempower the lower castes is

perfectly respectable traditional knowledge. However, it is easy to see that this cannot satisfy the *sarvodaya* criterion. Returning to the view expressed by Sangvai,<sup>72</sup> the Gandhian perspective rejects both: hegemonic claims by science and oppression resulting from elite traditional knowledge. This brings us to the *sarvodaya* ideal expressed in knowledge terms: knowledge, in order to be worth producing, must be of some use to the last woman in society. Alongside *swaraj*, *ahimsa*, and so on, this is an ideal that Gandhi exhorts us to reach for.

Knowledge produced among the people, by the people—that is, *lokavidya*—is best positioned to satisfy this criterion. The locus of *lokavidya* is ordinary life as distinct from other (more visible) loci of knowledge production/organization/management such as the university or (academic or commercial) research laboratory. The *lokavidya* perspective recognizes that ordinary life is a center of knowledge production and not only an “implementer” of knowledge generated elsewhere. V. Sujatha, in discussing the state of the indigenous leather processing industry, makes the following comments about indigenous knowledge systems (used here in the broader sense of *lokavidya*, rather than the World Bank/ILO definitions):

It [indigenous knowledge] is created, sustained and modified in the living experience of ordinary people. It is compatible with the economic condition of the people and as technology involves low capital outlay. It is eco-friendly and involves comparatively less wastage....It caters to local markets and is therefore within the comprehension and control of the communities involved, unlike a situation where the village communities become susceptible to mega market fluctuations which they do not even know of, leave alone control.<sup>73</sup>

The holders of *lokavidya* are members of society who constitute its majority and yet have been unable to benefit significantly from the development process. These are also largely the constituents of the informal economy. In the heyday of modernization theory, when the belief was widespread that the modern capitalist sector with large industry would gradually expand and absorb the entire working population, *lokavidya* stood largely neglected (and arguably discredited) in development theory; destined for either extinction or absorption into the modern sector, much

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like the informal economy itself. In this regard, Sahasrabudhey notes:

Modern knowledge (science and technology) is university knowledge, organised knowledge. Organised knowledge has grown with the growth of the modern state and class-society, and this mode of development has constantly violated and disorganised *lokavidya*. It has incessantly violated the interests of women, peasants, adivasis and the industrial communities, devastating their sources of strength. One message that we get from Gandhi's life, from his program of *khadi* and village industry, is that *lokavidya* can be the source of strength for the people.<sup>74</sup>

Crucially, just as Gandhi's thought is neither traditional nor modern and bedevils any attempt to characterize it as such, so also *lokavidya* cannot be easily categorized as one or the other. It constantly evolves, adapts, and changes and does not seek to tie people to traditional ways *for the sake of tradition*. It does not romanticize the past or the future. *The sole criterion is the use and control (production and management) of knowledge by people in the course of their ordinary life*. It is knowledge that is created during the course of daily need fulfillment and as such carries with it the criterion of applicability and usefulness. Consider a farmer who has never gone to an agricultural college where a scientist works. Both have knowledge, but the knowledge of both is valued differently by society and the market economy. These two will never compete directly for the same job; can a farmer be a visiting professor at a university? The scientist produces knowledge in the form of scholarly publications; the farmer produces knowledge in the activity of growing his crop. The veracity of the scientist's knowledge is tested by peer review and replication in the laboratory or field; the veracity of the farmer's knowledge is tested by nature's "review" and replication in life. In response to a mistake, the scientist retracts his research paper/findings; a farmer may lose a significant proportion of his income and go into lifelong debt. This "existential" aspect of *lokavidya* is alluded to by M.N. Srinivas who notes, "If a new variety of seed or mode of cultivation fails, the man who pays the price, a price which occasionally may mean starvation, for it is not the extension officer."<sup>75</sup>

Knowledge inherited and added to by communities of artisans who work with wood, clay, iron, plastic, and other raw materials to produce articles



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medicinal knowledge to the pharmaceutical industry, ten Kate and Laird note:

Annual global markets for products in the healthcare, agriculture, horticulture, and biotechnology sectors derived from genetic resources lie between US\$500 billion and US\$800 billion....Direct links can still be made between many products on the market and knowledge systems dating back millennia. For example, of the approximately 120 pharmaceutical products derived from plants in 1985, 75 percent were discovered through the study of their traditional medical use.<sup>78</sup>

However, converse examples are not difficult to find either, where products of the formal knowledge economy have contributed to the growth of *lokavidya*. An interesting case in this regard is the Right to Information Act in India. Ordinary citizens have been empowered precisely because formal knowledge has flowed into *lokavidya* by means of such legislation.

Third, the world of *lokavidya* is also the world of caste divisions, and many types of artisanal knowledge is itself segregated along caste lines. Thus, a campaign to revitalize and valorize *lokavidya* cannot ignore caste realities.

And fourth, pointing to the existence of *lokavidya* and a valorization of its role should not be construed as support for the position that such knowledge is “good enough” for the masses or that the holders of *lokavidya* are unable to understand the subtleties and rigor of modern science but can only appreciate “non-formal” or rules-of-thumb knowledge.

Thus far, in an attempt to reinterpret Gandhi as a thinker of relevance for today's knowledge society, I have argued that people's knowledge was an important component of Gandhi's economic thought and I have briefly sketched the importance of reaching for a Gandhian theory of people's knowledge. I will end with some economic estimates regarding the importance of *lokavidya*. I have spoken about artisanal knowledge as one example of *lokavidya*. However important this may have been in Gandhi's time, one might ask if this type of knowledge is not rather a marginal part of Indian society today. Indeed, according to the standard narrative of economic development, the “traditional sector” of the economy is supposed to be gradually replaced by the more productive modern,

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capitalist sector. The economy of artisans, women, small farmers, indigenous people, and small retailers (who together constitute almost 90 percent of the working population), which has come to be called the informal economy, is supposed to disappear.<sup>79</sup> In knowledge terms, this can be seen as a replacement of an economy based on *lokavidya* by one based on organized/formal “modern” knowledge. The view of modernization theory is well captured by a recent Government of India report on the informal sector:

For many years governments and economists assumed that with the right mix of economic policies and resources, poor traditional economies would be transformed into dynamic modern economies. In this process the traditional or informal sector was expected to disappear as the modern or formal sector grew and absorbed more labor.<sup>80</sup>

However this has yet to happen. The report continues: “However contrary to expectation, the informal sector and informal employment have not disappeared but have grown everywhere.”<sup>81</sup> For example, the informal sector still accounts for around 75 percent of industrial employment and 40 percent of industrial output in India. The employment share of the formal sector in general, and large-scale industry in particular, has been stagnant for the past three decades.<sup>82</sup> The overwhelming persistence and even growth of informal economic activity in many developing countries is a testament to the fact that it is the knowledge of the people themselves that has continued to sustain them when the state or the modern capitalist economy has failed to provide for basic needs.<sup>83</sup>

As might be expected given its large size, the scope of informal activity is similarly extensive. It has long been understood that the informal economy does not refer simply to shoe-shine boys and hawkers on city pavements.<sup>84</sup> In India, according to a recent National Accounts Statistics survey, unorganized small-scale industry produced food products, beverages, cotton, wool, silk, textiles, wood and paper products, leather and chemical products, metal products, electrical and transport equipment, and repair services of various kinds including the repair of capital equipment.<sup>85</sup> Yet despite its size and scope, important exceptions notwithstanding, the working population in the informal economy has by and large not been able to constitute itself into an effective political group. In

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fact, one may hazard the conjecture that the last time this section of Indian society was effectively politically organized was under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The consequence has been extreme poverty, vulnerability, and degradation. It is important to emphasize that pointing to the abundance of *lokavidya* in the informal economy is not the same as romanticizing the poverty of this sector. Neither is a celebration of the “entrepreneurial spirit” of the informal sector being called for. Rather, pointing to the knowledge-rich and resource-poor nature of the informal economy is the starting point for a political project that demands due recognition, material and non-material, for its contribution to society.

Even accepting the vital role of the informal economy, one may still ask: what is the nature of the relationship today between Gandhi’s small-scale industry and informal sector industry? In fact, the fate of Indian traditional industry under colonialism is a contentious issue in the economic historiography of modern India. The “deindustrialization/nationalist” school maintains that traditional industry was decimated due to competition from cheap manufactured goods and deliberate colonial trade and industrial policy.<sup>86</sup> A more recent “revisionist” school maintains that continuity rather than rupture marks the artisanal landscape in colonial and post-colonial India.<sup>87</sup> The truth may lie somewhere in between. Even though traditional Indian industry suffered a long period of decline during colonial rule, several types of small-scale industry can even today trace its lineage to pre-colonial origins. Thus, rather than being annihilated, several types of industries survived with changes into the twentieth century and even grew in size in some cases. Tirthankar Roy observes that:

In some cases, the growth of the craft towns that figured prominently in the foregoing narrative has been truly enormous in the last fifty years. Surat at the turn of the century probably employed about 5–6,000 weavers in silk and lace. Today, the direct descendant of weaving, the powerloom, provides employment to about half a million. Moradabad brass engaged 7–8,000 full-time workers in 1924. In the 1990s, an estimate places the town’s metal workers at 150,000. Not more than a few thousands were found in the carpets in the Mirzapur-Bhadohi area in the interwar period. 300,000 is the approximate figure in the 1990s.... These cases, it has been suggested earlier, capture a steadily increasing

share of the informal sector in industrial wage labour.<sup>88</sup>

Thus it should be clear that when we discuss *lokavidya* and its importance, we are not talking about something marginal to Indian society. Indeed, the political power of Gandhi's ideas lay in the recognition of the dominant role that *lokavidya* plays in India's economy. A political alliance of farmers-artisans-indigenous people-women, who are the holders of *lokavidya*, still carries the potential to create a new development path that will be genuinely inclusive and capable of eradicating poverty while providing work for all.

## Conclusion

We started with the question: what is the contemporary relevance of Gandhi's economic thought? Are *khadi* and village industries simply too anachronistic in the age of the Internet? The question may now be tentatively answered. If we understand Gandhi's emphasis on *khadi*, *charkha*, and village industry as a program for restoring the rightful place of people's knowledge in the development process, then the relevance immediately becomes clear. The question as to whose knowledge is relevant for economic development, for building a new society was raised by Gandhi directly and indirectly in many ways, as I have tried to show. The conventional top-down model of economic development based on expert knowledge has met only with partial success. A genuine dialog between knowledge systems is urgent. The social and ecological violence widely in evidence in India and elsewhere has prompted a look at indigenous and traditional knowledge even from international development institutions, but certainly from people's movements. In addition, the recent rise of the concept of the "knowledge society" has also begun to alter the relationship between scientific/formal knowledge and *lokavidya*.<sup>89</sup> I have argued that Gandhi is an early champion of people's knowledge, and his thought is readily available to us to shape the direction of discourse surrounding the concept of the knowledge society such that it becomes relevant to a much wider section of society. A Gandhian perspective on the knowledge question leads us to *lokavidya*, or people's knowledge, which is widely dispersed in society, is dynamic, and satisfies their wants. Gandhi can assume renewed political significance if his key ideas on economics

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are recast in knowledge terms. This is not only because the language of knowledge is “fashionable” today. Rather, understanding his economic alternatives in terms of *lokavidya*, as opposed to say *khadi* and village industry, shows us a way forward for a just and sustainable development model, based on *satya* (Truth) and *ahimsa* (non-violence), that is sensitive to the changing global political and economic realities.

### Acknowledgments

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### Notes

1. Loosely translated, *lokavidya* is “the knowledge with people in society” (*loka* = people/world, *vidya* = knowledge/skill/art). In using this term, I am following Sahasrabudhey and Sahasrabudhey, eds., *Lokavidya vichar* (Thoughts on Lokavidya) (2001).

2. “I would like to say to the diligent reader of my writings and to others who are interested in them that I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent. In my search after Truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things. Old as I am in age, I have no feeling that I have ceased to grow inwardly or that my growth will stop at the dissolution of the flesh. What I am concerned with is my readiness to obey the call of Truth, my God, from moment to moment, and, therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he still has faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the latter of the two on the same subject” (Gandhi, *Harijan* April 29, 1933, p.2).

3. *Hind Swaraj*, or *Indian Home Rule*, can be considered a fundamental text for understanding Gandhi’s thought. He wrote the book in the short

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period of ten days (November 13–22, 1909) aboard the ship Kildonan Castle on his way back from England to South Africa. The text lays out his basic position on “modern civilization” as well as British imperialism and elaborates on the true meaning of “swaraj,” or self-rule. See the editorial introduction in Parel (1997).

4. See, for example, Bindé, *Towards Knowledge Societies: UNESCO World Report* (2005).

5. Sahasrabudhey and Sahasrabudhey, eds., *Lokavidya vichar* (Thoughts on Lokavidya) (2001).

6. A dialog between disparate knowledge traditions, though somewhat different than the one being proposed here, is also apparent in Gandhi’s own thought. The range of influences Gandhi gives credit to in *Hind Swaraj* include Indian economic historians Romesh Chandra Dutt and Dadabhai Naoroji, English political economist John Ruskin, political theorist Henry David Thoreau, and social and cultural critics Edward Carpenter and Leo Tolstoy. Gandhi’s creative use of this “other West” (Rudolph and Rudolph, *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and At Home* [2006]) in combination with his own Vaishnava background, his Jain influences (in particular the ideas of *ahimsa* and *aparigraha*), and his reading of Christianity is an interesting study in the hybridization of disparate knowledge traditions. See also Parel, “Editor’s Introduction” (1997), for an account of the range of influences on Gandhi.

7. Patnaik, *Vikalphin nahi hai duniya: sabhyata, samaj aur buddhijivi ki sthiti par kuch vichar* (Another World is Possible: Some Thoughts on Civilization, Society, and the State of the Intellectual) (2000). Patnaik recalls how Rammanohar Lohia spoke of “official Gandhism,” which consisted of *sarkari* (state sponsored) and *mathi* (spiritual) varieties: the first category included those Gandhians who sustained their activities largely on government grants, and the second category included those who, like Vinoba Bhave, focused almost exclusively on the spiritual as opposed to political aspects of Gandhi’s thought. Gandhi, on the other hand, Patnaik notes, “...is one of those people in history who created situations involving *lathis* [sticks], bullets and bloodshed on the streets, created restlessness and revolt in millions, [and] brought women out of the home and on to the streets” (p.134; my translation).

8. So much so that Vinoba Bhave, the preeminent Gandhian leader in post-independence India, found it in himself to support Prime Minister

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Indira Gandhi in her imposition of “Emergency” rule. The Mahatma himself would have profoundly disagreed with the prime minister’s statement that *satyagraha* had no place in independent India since the country was now ruled by its own people.

9. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (1997), p.26; emphasis added.

10. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (1997), p.28.

11. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (1997), p.73; emphasis added.

12. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1958–94), volume 43, pp. 412–13.

13. See, for example, Terchek, “Problematizing Modernity: Gandhi’s Decentering Impulse” (2001).

14. Sahasrabudhey, *Gandhi’s Challenge to Modern Science* (2002).

15. Patnaik, *Vikalpin nahi hai duniya: sabhyata, samaj aur buddhijivi ki sthiti par kuch vichar* (Another World is Possible: Some Thoughts on Civilization, Society, and the State of the Intellectual) (2000), p.94; my translation.

16. Throughout this paper I have used the conventional term “economic development” to refer to Gandhi’s efforts to build a new type of economy and polity in India. This is partly a matter of convenience. I am aware of the problems of Eurocentrism in using this term (see, for example, Banuri, “Development and the Politics of Knowledge: A Critical Interpretation of the Social Role of Modernization Theories in the Development on the Third World” [1990a], Banuri, “Modernization and Its Discontents: A Cultural Perspective on Theories of Development” [1990b]; Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* [1994]; and Mehmet, *Westernizing the Third World: The Eurocentricity of Economic Development Theories* [1995]), and of the fact that Gandhi himself would reject most of what passes for economic development today.

17. Bose notes in his *Studies in Gandhism* (1998) that the chief task that Gandhi set for himself after returning from South Africa was the collective organization of the working people on non-violent terms. To this were added “a few ancillary aims like the political independence of India...” (p.128; emphasis added).

18. Gandhi, *Village Swaraj* (2002), p.130; emphasis added.

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19. Gandhi, *Village Swaraj* (2002), p.14.

20. Patnaik, *Vikalpin nahi hai duniya: sabhyata, samaj aur buddhijivi ki sthiti par kucch vichar* (Another World is Possible: Some Thoughts on Civilization, Society, and the State of the Intellectual) (2000), p.94; my translation.

21. “What I object to, is the *craze* for machinery, not machinery as such. The *craze* is for what they call labour-saving machinery. Men go on ‘saving labour,’ till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation” (Gandhi, *Village Swaraj* [2002], p.18; emphasis in original).

22. Gandhi, *Village Swaraj* (2002), p.134.

23. Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place* (1989), p.13; emphasis added.

24. Gandhi, *The Gospel of Swadeshi* (1967), p.108.

25. Government of India, *Unorganised Manufacturing Sector in India: Employment, Assets and Borrowings* (2008).

26. Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place* (1989), p.20.

27. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (1997), p.103.

28. Most likely Gandhi is referring to Jagdish Chandra Bose (or possibly Satyendra Nath Bose), both eminent Indian physicists, and Prafulla Chandra Ray, an equally eminent chemist.

29. Gandhi, *Village Swaraj* (2002), p.56.

30. Banuri, “Modernization and Its Discontents: A Cultural Perspective on Theories of Development” (1990b), p.98.

31. See, for example, the Gandhi-Tagore exchange collected in Bhat-tacharya, ed., *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates Between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915–1941* (1997).

32. Gandhi, *Village Swaraj* (2002), p.140.

33. Bilgrami, “Gandhi, the Philosopher” (2003), p.4160.

34. Gandhi, *Village Swaraj* (2002), p.1.

35. Zachariah, *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History* (2005), p.197.

36. See Zachariah, *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History* (2005); and Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-colonial Histories* (1993), in particular Chapter 10 for two accounts of these debates.

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37. Bhattacharya, "Swaraj in Ideas" (1984).
38. Gandhi, *Village Swaraj* (2002), pp. 94, 96.
39. "Nehru's Reply to Gandhi," October 9, 1945, in Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (1997), p.152.
40. B.R. Ambedkar's critique of localism and of the village as a "den of ignorance" also needs to be taken very seriously (perhaps more seriously than Nehru's elite views), since Ambedkar spoke for those who had everything to fear from a strengthening of local elites in the name of decentralization. Given that this paper is primarily concerned with economic rather than governance issues, a fuller discussion is outside its scope. For more on this, see Bhattacharya and Basole, "The Phantom of Liberty: Mo(der)nism and Postcolonial Imaginations in India" (2009).
41. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993).
42. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993), pp. 200–210. Other than Kumarappa, the Commission consisted of 4 industrialists, 5 scientists, 3 economists, and 2 political figures (Nehru and the labor leader N.M. Joshi).
43. Dandekar and Rath, "Poverty in India–I: Dimensions and Trends" (1971a), and Dandekar and Rath, "Poverty in India–II: Policies and Programmes" (1971b).
44. Import duties and tariffs have been substantially lowered or eliminated, stock markets opened to foreign investors, and the industrial licensing system dismantled. See Rao and Dutt, "A Decade of Reforms: The Indian Economy in the 1990s" (2006) for one account.
45. See Rao and Dutt, "A Decade of Reforms: The Indian Economy in the 1990s" (2006). Other indicators show this as well. The average Indian family today is absorbing 115 kg less per year of food grains than in 1991; average calorie intake has fallen from already low levels, and since data show that urban calorie intake has risen, it is rural absorption that has fallen much more than the average (Patnaik, "Neoliberalism and Rural Poverty in India" [2007], p.3134).
46. See Chen and Ravallion, "The Developing World is Poorer Than We Thought, But No Less Successful in the Fight Against Poverty" (2008).
47. See Murickan, George, Emmanuel, Boban and Pillai, *Development-Induced Displacement: Case of Kerala* (2003).
48. Jodha, *Rural Common Property Resources: A Growing Crisis* (1991).

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49. See, for example, Banuri, "Development and the Politics of Knowledge: A Critical Interpretation of the Social Role of Modernization Theories in the Development on the Third World" (1990a), Banuri, "Modernization and Its Discontents: A Cultural Perspective on Theories of Development" (1990b); Bhattacharya and Basole, "The Phantom of Liberty: Mo(der)nism and Postcolonial Imaginations in India" (2009); Brohman, "Universalism, Eurocentrism, and Ideological Bias in Development Studies: From Modernization to Neoliberalism" (1995); Kanth, *Breaking with the Enlightenment: The Twilight of History and the Rediscovery of Utopia* (1997); and Mehmet, *Westernizing the Third World: The Eurocentricity of Economic Development Theories* (1995).

50. This view can be traced to earlier discussions in anthropology surrounding the concept of "ethnoscience" as opposed to "modern science."

51. I owe this framework of knowledge scarcity versus knowledge abundance to Sunil Sahasrabudhey and Avinash Jha. For a brief discussion of issues surrounding the interaction of universities with multiple knowledge production sites in society, see Basole, "Eurocentrism, the University and Multiplicity of Knowledge Production Sites" (2009).

52. Sangvai, "The New People's Movements in India" (2007), p.115.

53. Sangvai, "The New People's Movements in India" (2007), p.115; emphasis added.

54. The following draws upon Basole, "Knowledge, Work and Education" (2008)

55. For review of this literature, see Fuchs, *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age* (2008), particularly Chapter 4.

56. For example, by 1992 the various components of the Ford Escort were being manufactured and assembled in fifteen countries across three continents (see Gereffi, Korzeniewicz, and Korzeniewicz, "Introduction: Global Commodity Chains" [1994]). Similarly, the shoe company Nike does not own any factories. It relies instead on short-term contracts from a diverse array of suppliers. Nike's contribution is not in the material production domain, but in the intangible domain of ideas and symbols (that is, the Nike logo or brand).

57. Sahasrabudhey, "Knowledge Flux and the Demand on Thought" (2008).

58. Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (1973), p.127. Measured in terms of output, an information

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or knowledge society is one in which more than 50 percent of the gross national product is accounted for by “knowledge sectors,” such as research and development, education, information technology, and certain types of services (that include marketing, management, and advertising).

59. Bindé, *Towards Knowledge Societies: UNESCO World Report* (2005), p.46.

60. An important consideration is that the “North-South divide” of the age of industry is reproduced and reinforced in the information age as the “digital divide.” Thus, only about 11 percent of the world’s population has access to the Internet (though this number is rapidly growing) and 90 percent of those connected are from industrialized countries (North America, 30 percent; Europe, 30; and Asia-Pacific, 30) (see Bindé, *Towards Knowledge Societies: UNESCO World Report* [2005]).

61. [www.knowledgecommission.gov.in](http://www.knowledgecommission.gov.in).

62. Finger, “Introduction and Overview” (2004), p.1.

63. See Finger and Schuler, eds., *Poor People’s Knowledge: Promoting Intellectual Property in Developing Countries* (2004), for several approaches to the problem of developing intellectual property rights for *lokavidya*; and Basole, “*Lokavidya* Goes Virtual? Indigenous Knowledge in the Gatesian Age” (2006), for a discussion of virtual representations of *lokavidya*. Also, some experiments have recently been undertaken in creating a common property rights regime for traditional knowledge in Kerala, see: [www.hindu.com/2008/06/28/stories/2008062856600100.htm](http://www.hindu.com/2008/06/28/stories/2008062856600100.htm) (accessed May 24, 2013).

64. To use the title of a World Bank publication: Finger and Schuler, eds., *Poor People’s Knowledge: Promoting Intellectual Property in Developing Countries* (2004).

65. For one exception, see Kothari, “Theoretical Streams in Marginalized Peoples’ Knowledge(s): Systems, Asystems, and Subltern Knowledge(s)” (2002).

66. Sahasrabudhey, *Gandhi’s Challenge to Modern Science* (2002).

67. For several studies around the concept of *lokavidya*, see Sahasrabudhey and Sahasrabudhey, eds., *Lokavidya vichar* (Thoughts on Lokavidya) (2001). For English language explorations of the relationship between indigenous and traditional knowledge and *lokavidya*, see Vajpeyi, “The Knowledge Debate Reopened” (2006); and Basole, “*Lokavidya* Goes Virtual? Indigenous Knowledge in the Gatesian Age” (2006).

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68. Gandhi himself does not use the word “science” very often, but his position can be inferred from his discussion of “Western civilization,” “the machine” (technology), and modern medicine and the professions.

69. Kothari, “Theoretical Streams in Marginalized Peoples’ Knowledge(s): Systems, Asystems, and Sublateral Knowledge(s)” (2002), p.225.

70. The Sanskrit word “loka” may be used in the sense of “people” as in *lok-kala* (people’s art) or *lok-niti* (people’s politics), as well as in the sense of “world” as in *para-lok* (the other world).

71. Cited in Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Last Phase* (1958), p.65; emphasis added.

72. Sangvai, “The New People’s Movements in India” (2007).

73. Sujatha, “Leather Processing: Role of Indigenous Technology” (2002), p.4672.

74. Sahasrabudhey, *Gandhi’s Challenge to Modern Science* (2002), p.86.

75. Srinivas, “Village Studies, Participant Observation and Social Science Research in India” (1975), p.1389.

76. See, for example, Haynes, “Artisan Cloth-Producers and the Emergence of Powerloom Manufacture in Western India 1920–1950” (2001), for an account of the powerloom industry in Maharashtra, and Haynes, “The Dynamics of Continuity in Indian Domestic Industry: Jari Manufacture in Surat, 1900–47” (1986), for a study of the *jari* (gold thread) industry. On a different note, see Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India* (2000), for an account of how modern and traditional agronomic knowledge and practices interact in contemporary peasant agriculture.

77. Brokensha, Warren, and Werner, eds., *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Development* (1980), is an early collection attempting to demonstrate the relevance of ethnoscience (indigenous knowledge) to development. Warren, Slikkerveer, and Brokensha, eds., *The Cultural Dimension of Development: Indigenous Knowledge Systems* (1995), Sillitoe, Bikker, and Pottier, eds., *Participating in Development: Approaches to Indigenous Knowledge* (2002), and Sillitoe, ed., *Local Science vs Global Science: Approaches to Indigenous Knowledge in International Development* (2007), are more recent efforts along similar lines. To this can be added two recent World Bank Publications: Finger and Schuler, eds., *Poor People’s Knowledge: Promoting Intellectual Property in Developing Countries* (2004) and The World Bank, *Indigenous Knowledge: Local*

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*Pathways to Global Development* (2004). The general form that these accounts take is an edited collection of case studies demonstrating the relevance of certain types of knowledge (medical, ecological) to development objectives.

78. ten Kate and Laird, “Bioprospecting Agreements and Benefit Sharing with Local Communities” (2004), p.134.

79. A canonical model of this type is the Lewis model of “unlimited labor supply” (see his, “Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labor” [1954]).

80. Government of India, (*Draft*) *Manual on Survey of Informal Employment and Informal Sector* (n.d.), Chapter 1, p.1.

81. Government of India, (*Draft*) *Manual on Survey of Informal Employment and Informal Sector* (n.d.), Chapter 1, p.1.

82. According to the most recent Tenth Five Year Plan (2002–2007), employment in the organized or formal manufacturing sector remained more or less constant at 23–24 percent of total manufacturing employment in the period between 1991 and 2000 (see Breman, *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy* [1996], p.6, Table 1.2). Breman turns the question on its head and says that “more than the persistence of the informal sector economy, the emergence of formal sector employment needs explanation” (p.5). The five-year plans are available at [planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/welcome.html](http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/welcome.html) (accessed May 24, 2013).

83. “Informal economy” refers to an entire sphere of economic activity characterized by labor intensive, small-scale production, low wages and low capital investments, limited technical division of labor, and so on. It is called “informal” because it is usually unregulated and untaxed by the state. In developing countries, the informal economy usually accounts for over 90 percent of employment and over half of national output.

84. See Castells and Portes, “World Underneath: The Origins, Dynamics, and Effects of the Informal Economy” (1989).

85. Several surveys have been carried out in India since the 1950s at periodic intervals by the National Sample Survey Organization to estimate the size and contributions to gross domestic product of the small-scale and the unorganized (the term used for informal) manufacturing sector (both urban and rural). The definition of unorganized is usually not being registered under the Indian Factories Act of 1947.

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86. The early nationalist writers included R.C. Dutt and Rajani Palme Dutt. A more recent writer holding this view is Amiya K. Bagchi (see his, “Deindustrialization in India in the Nineteenth Century: Some Theoretical Implications” [1976]). An oft-cited macro statistic in this regard is Paul Bairoch’s estimates of the “levels of industrialization,” according to which India accounted for 25 percent of world manufacturing output in 1750, 8.6 percent in 1860, and 1.7 percent in 1900 (cited in Simmons, “ ‘De-Industrialization,’ Industrialization and the Indian Economy, c. 1850–1947” [1985], p.600, Table 1).

87. Roy, *Artisans and Industrialization: Indian Weaving in the Twentieth Century* (1993).

88. Roy, *Traditional Industry in the Economy of Colonial India* (1999), p.232.

89. See Bindé, *Towards Knowledge Societies: UNESCO World Report* (2005); Sahasrabudhey and Sahasrabudhey, eds., *Lokavidya Vichar* (Thoughts on Lokavidya) (2001); and Basole, “Knowledge, Work and Education” (2008).

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