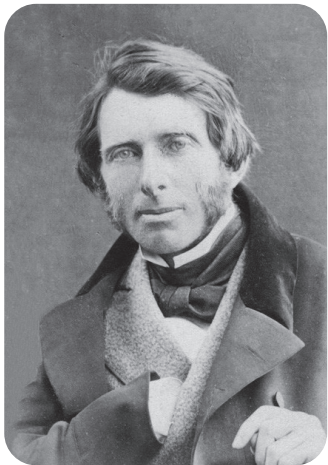


Craft

as a vehicle for emancipation:

Gandhi, Ruskin, and India's independence

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John Ruskin in 1863

John Ruskin's writings in *Unto This Last* sent earthquakes through the British establishment, and were considered heresies when they were first published in 1860. Ruskin's view was that the establishment had lost a sense of morality and ethics through rampant industrialisation, capitalism and a sense of entitlement. Factory owners had amassed great individual wealth from taking both nature's resources (coal, metals) and the labour of man:

// ... whereas it has long been known and declared that the poor have no right to the property of the rich, I wish it also to be known and declared that the rich have no right to the property of the poor. (17.75)

This sentiment challenged the paradigm of the time, so much so that he was told to stop publishing them in the *Cornhill Magazine* that first carried them, and in response wrote possibly his most influential passage:

// I desire, in closing this series of introductory papers, to leave this one fact clearly stated. There is no wealth but life. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest numbers of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest, who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others. (17.105)

Contained in this passage we see a clear and timeless embodiment of truth that speaks directly to the soul of all people and still rings true today. The ripples of

this message resonated around the world, inspiring many and bearing fruits in ways which I doubt Ruskin himself could have imagined, or believed possible. For example, Mahatma Gandhi read Ruskin's *Unto This Last* in 1904 and in his autobiography (1960) wrote "I determined to change my life in accordance with [Ruskin's] ideals."

Of all the books that he had read, "the one that brought about an instantaneous and practical transformation in my life was *Unto This Last*. I translated it later into Gujarati, entitling it *Sarvodaya* (the welfare of all)."

Gandhi also saw on an economic, political and individual level that "It is machinery that has impoverished India". In his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1909), he summarises Ruskin's anti-industrial utopianism in three main lessons:

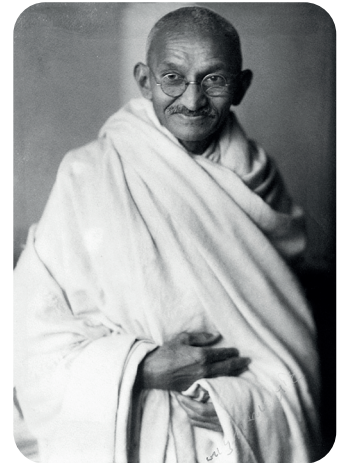
1. That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all.
2. That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's, inasmuch as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work.
3. That a life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman, is the life worth living.

Gandhi saw the power and 'truth force' within Ruskin's ideas and began to use them to deploy the unique approach he called 'satyagraha' in the Indian independence movement. Through encouraging local and domestic production of items, such as the homespun cloth 'khaddar', over British manufactured products, he developed the Swadeshi (home-grown) political movement.

Through endorsing these simple acts of craft Gandhi was able to empower and functionalise both the individual and collective skillsets in effective acts of freedom and truth, which paved the way for both the individual's and India's independence. In doing so, I believe Gandhi role modelled to the world the first act of 'craftivism'.

Gandhi went on to promote these craft-centred principles in education and social realms, influencing educational policy, practice and reforms in schooling; learning through doing, self-reliance through sustainability in livelihoods, respect for manual skills, work integrated learning, and emphasised that handicrafts should be taught "not merely for production work but for developing intellect of the pupils".

Gandhi's famous visit to Lancashire mill workers and Ruskin Mill's work with young people are connected through John Ruskin's radical vision.



Studio portrait of
Gandhi, 1931