

Bharti Parmar Khadi

A SADAA Teaching Resource - KS3

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Artworks and artists' lives are valuable ways of understanding the past. This teaching guide supports students to engage them in the history classroom. It focuses on an artwork by Bharti Parmar, a contemporary collaborator of the South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive (SADAA), and includes self-authored reflections by the artist herself. The guide is designed to fit within KS3 curricula on the British empire in India, postwar British history, and industrialisation; as well as textiles and art and design. It is equally adaptable to GCSE History: Migration, Empires and the People or GCSE Art and Design. This booklet offers resources to support lesson planning and activities, for use alongside the accompanying slides.

ABOUT SADAA

SADAA is a national archive that conserves, digitises, shares, and advances the work of first generation British South Asian artists, including Syed Saleem Arif Quadri. Currently housed at the Birmingham Museum Collection Centre, SADAA formed in 1999 in response to a growing concern that vital works by South Asian writers and artists were disappearing or becoming inaccessible. Our collection is a rich and irreplaceable resource for anyone studying a seminal chapter of British history.

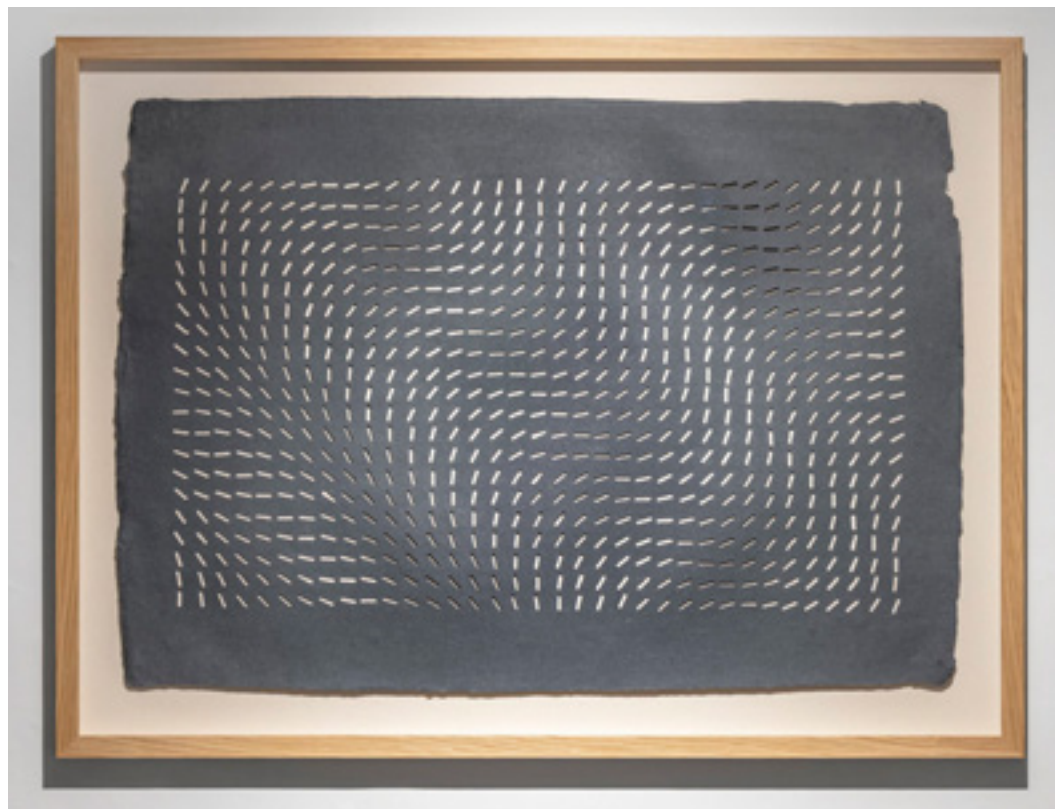
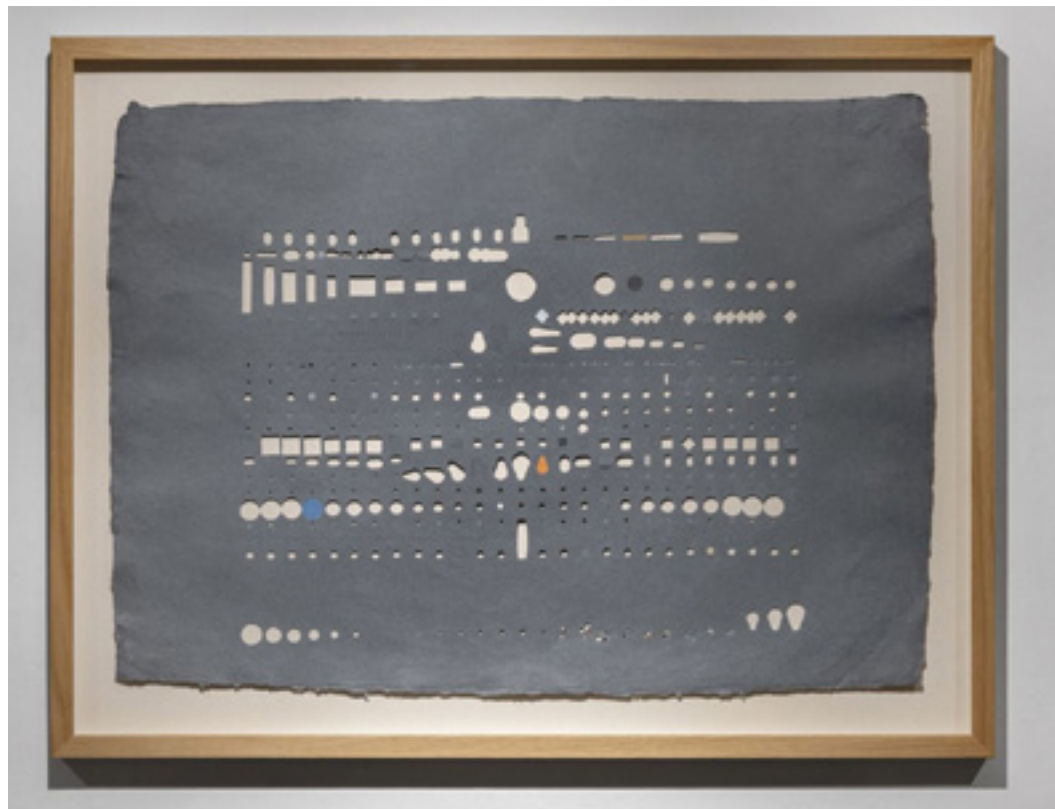
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QUESTIONS

Why are textiles valuable
sources for studying
history?

How can historians study
experiences of empire?



ABOUT THE WORK

Bharti Parmar's Khadi is a multi-media installation commissioned by the British Textile Biennial in 2021. The work's title refers both to a form of handmade cotton watercolour paper in India, and the handwoven cotton advocated by Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi as part of the movement to end British colonial rule in South Asia. Parmar's installation Khadi aptly coincides with the 90th anniversary of Gandhi's 1931 visit to the English town of Darwen, a centre of industrial textile production that was deeply impacted by the Swadeshi movement, which called for Indian people to use India-produced goods such as handmade textiles instead of industrially produced fabrics imported from Britain. Although the British government intended Gandhi to halt the boycott after witnessing the adversity experienced by English mill workers, Gandhi's speech to the mill workers instead rallied them to support the cause of Indian independence.

Parmar's installation Khadi departs from the memory and legacies of this significant occasion to explore the material and political resonances of cotton today. The installation is made up of three parts. At its centre are two cabinets whose construction references industrial sewing inspection tables. Where such tables might be used to examine fabric produced in a factory, they are here repurposed to display ephemera related to Gandhi. This substitution evokes the manner in which Gandhi's political tactics disrupted British industrial production to advance the cause of India's independence.

The work's second part comprises a series of intricate drawings made on khadi paper. Produced from recycled cotton t-shirts in India, the paper's source references the globalisation of textile production in the contemporary fashion industry, drawing attention to the exploitative dynamics of low-waged and outsourced labour. The drawings themselves are produced with punch tools that evoke the technology of the Jacquard loom – a device for producing textiles from punch card patterns. By using punch cards to programme a sequence of actions, the Jacquard loom anticipated contemporary computing technology. Through this chain of associations, Parmar's installation prompts reflection on the historical trajectories connecting industrial textile production under the British empire and the contemporary fashion industry in a globalised economy shaped by information technologies.



Installation view of Bharti Parmar's Khadi. British Textile Biennial, Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, 2021. Image: Harry Meadley.

The third section of Khadi features a film made in collaboration with award-winning filmmaker Sima Gonsai. The piece centres on oral histories of textile production in Blackburn through an extended interview with the film-maker's own father, who worked in the industry. Interwoven with the stories of Gonsai's father are scenes of Parmar at work with various punch tools and khadi paper, demystifying the artistic process as itself a form of labour. The film further tracks the artist and film-maker as they visit the 'cotton famine road' in Rochdale – an extended cobblestone pathway across the moors painstakingly built by mill workers who faced unemployment when cotton from US slave-labour was blockaded as workers sided with abolitionists during the US Civil War. Through these and other themes, the film richly interlays histories of empire, labour, and power with our present moment, all connected through the simple material of cotton.



Cabinets of textiles museum material, punched drawings on recycled khadi paper and film in Bharti Parmar's Khadi at the British Textile Biennial, Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, 2021. Images: Harry Meadley.



ABOUT THE ARTIST: BHARTI PARMAR

Bharti Parmar is a visual artist and academic currently living and working in Birmingham, UK. Born in Leeds in 1966, Parmar studied Fine Art at Coventry Polytechnic, before completing an MA in Printmaking at the Royal College of Art, London; and subsequently a PhD at the University of Wolverhampton, focusing on the poetic dimensions of Victorian material culture.

Parmar's artwork and research has persistently engaged the history of textiles. Working across multiple formats and media, Parmar approaches textiles in terms of systems: as materials that are made in a systematic manner, and materials embedded in wider social, historical, and political systems. This interest is rooted in the artist's personal history. Parmar's family emigrated from the Indian state of Gujarat to the UK in 1962, where her father then worked in industrial mills in the cities of Leeds and Bradford. Her familial story surfaces a web of connections between empire, industrialisation, labour, and postwar migration that converge around textiles. Engaging these connections in her practice, Parmar works at the intersections of art and vernacular crafts, drawing from European art history – such as the surrealist fascination with the uncanny and overlooked – and from knowledges rooted in South Asia.

In the course of Parmar's thirty years of practice, she has exhibited work, lectured, and taught widely. Recent solo exhibitions include *Khadi* at the Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery as part of the 2021 British Textile Biennial; and group exhibitions include *Exchanges* at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester. Her work is held in numerous public and private collections including the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and the University of Baroda, India; and she has been the recipient of multiple awards and grants from institutions including the Arts Council England. She was previously a full-time lecturer in the Faculty of Arts & Education at the University of Plymouth and has served as a visiting tutor at multiple universities across the UK.



Still from Bharti Parmar: *Khadi*, 2021. Huckleberry Films.

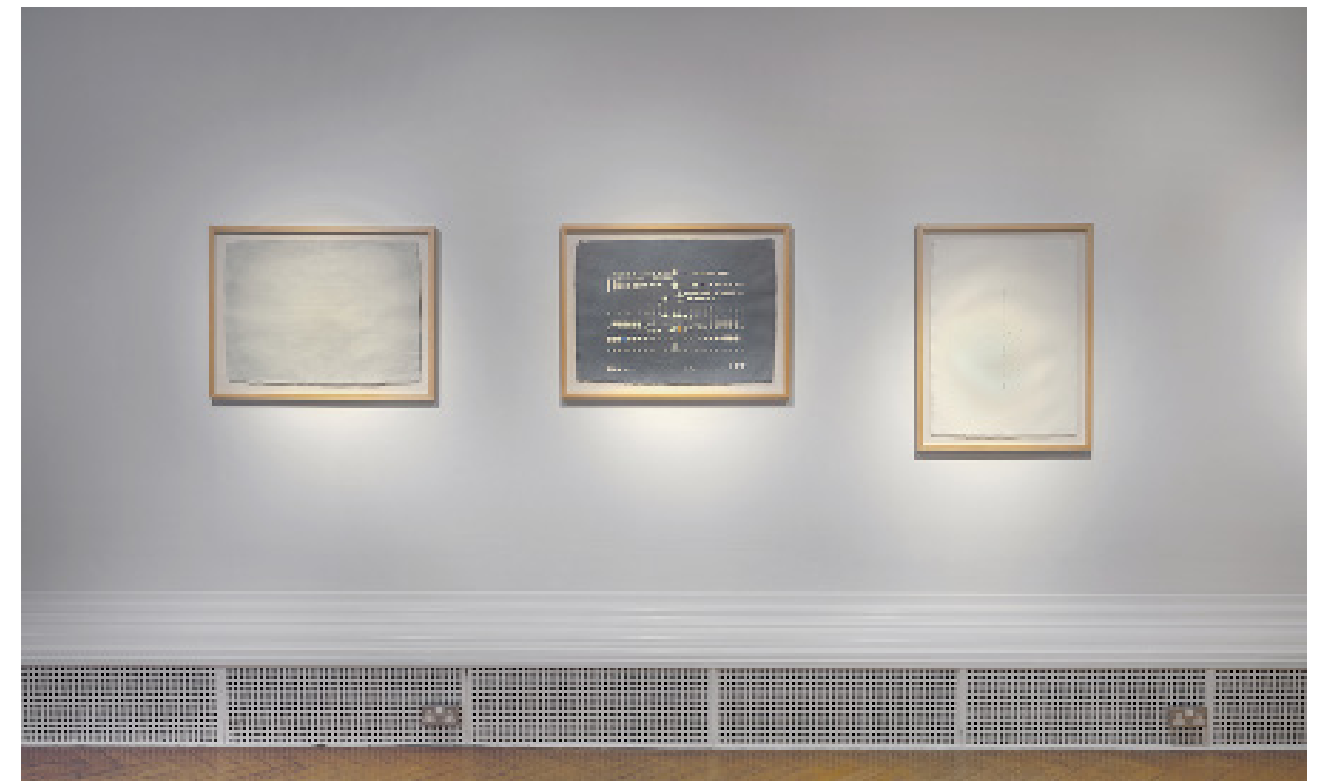
KHADI AND INDIAN INDEPENDENCE

In my exhibition Khadi, first shown at the Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery in 2021, I use wordplay to aid our understanding of the two meanings of the term: Khadi = cloth, and Khadi = paper.

The first 'khadi' (also known as khaddar) refers to the hand-spun cloth, typically cotton, as championed by Mahatma Gandhi as part of the national movement for Swaraj (self-rule) and Swadeshi (economic self-sufficiency: 'swa' = one's own; 'desh' = homeland or country). Cotton grown and produced in India was shipped to Lancashire for processing and sent back to India by the British, who sold it for forty times dearer. Gandhi realised that boycotting foreign cloth, through swadeshi, was a means of injuring, through non-violent means, the British economy. This injury would then advance the cause of swaraj, or Indian independence by challenging Britain's economic dominance over the Indian Subcontinent, and alerting colonial officials to the power of the anti-colonial movement. Gandhi promoted the spinning of cotton daily by each household. Spinning was so important to the independence movement that independent India's flag initially featured a stylised spinning wheel. After independence was achieved in 1947, the spinning wheel replaced by the Ashoka Chakra, a 24-spoked wheel derived from the emblem of Emperor Ashoka, which appears on the the Lion Capital – or the head of a column supporting four lions – that Ashoka erected in Sarnath, India around 250 BCE. The wheel was intended to symbolise the continuous movement and development of the nation.

The second 'khadi' refers to expensive, handmade watercolour paper made of 100% cotton rag. Khadi watercolour paper is very strong and durable. Its texture makes it ideal for absorbing watercolour paint. To make the works in my installation, I sourced khadi paper from India made from recycled cotton t-shirts. To make this material, cotton rag is pulped, strained, and re-constituted as paper, and then shipped to Europe and North America as a hand-made, high-quality, and expensive commodity for western consumption.

There are drawings on three shades of paper in my exhibition: white paper made from white t-shirts, black from black t-shirts, and grey from a mixture of pulp. By using this khadi paper as a material for drawing and sculpture, I intend to highlight economic circuits of exchange, questions of value, cyclical journeys, and the geographies that materials traverse through consumption, recycling, and labour.



Top: Still from Khadi. Cotton, Colonialism and Resistance. Film by Sima Gonsai, commissioned by Bharti Parmar, 10 mins 30 seconds, 2021. Image: Bharti Parmar.

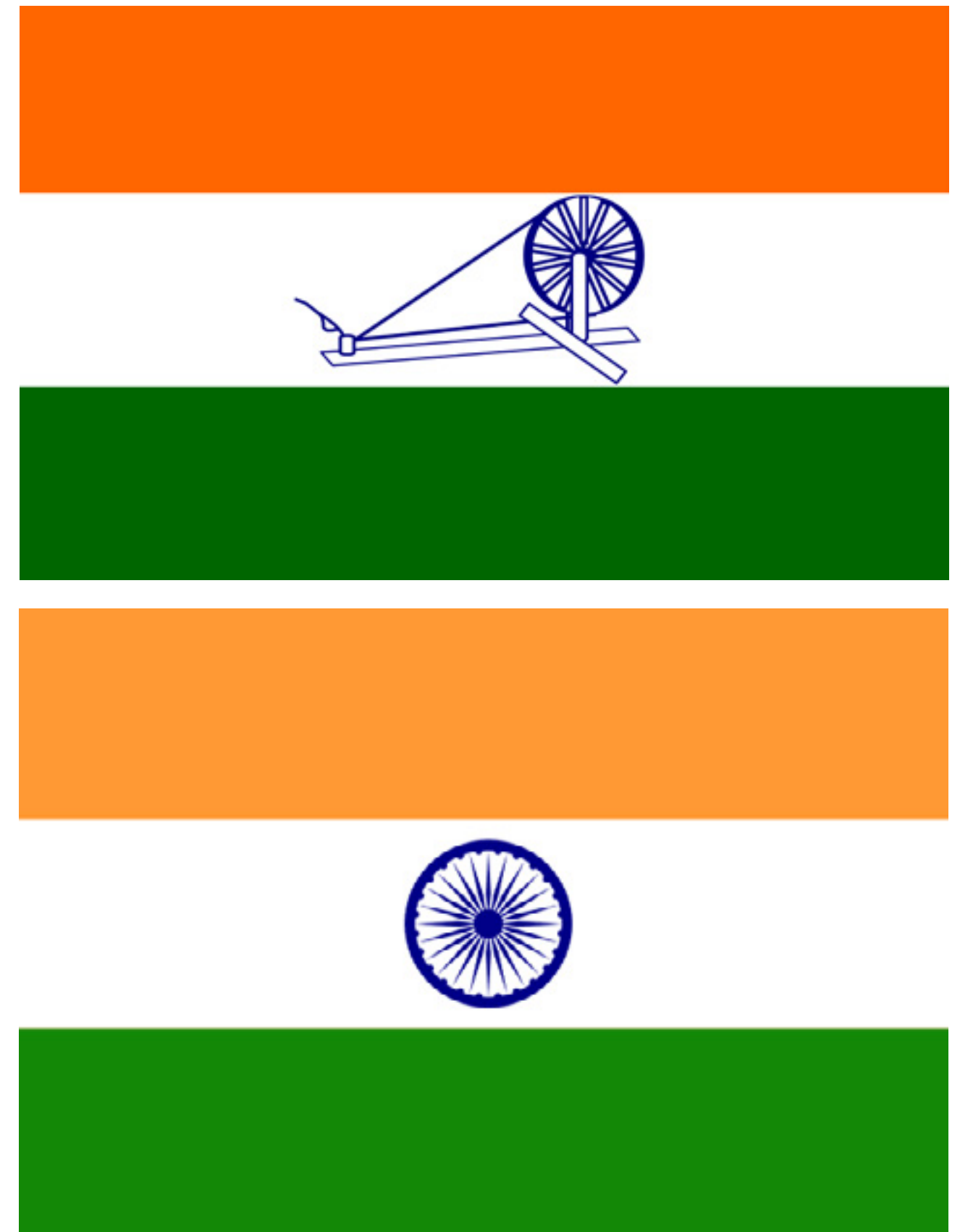
Bottom: punched drawings on recycled khadi paper Bharti Parmar's Khadi at the British Textile Biennial, Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, 2021. Image: Harry Meadley.

All the paper in the exhibition is the same size (56 x 76 cm) because it is made 'couched'. Couching (pronounced cooching) is a key step in the traditional process of making handmade paper. After a sheet of paper is formed on a mould (a wooden frame with a fine wire screen), the wet sheet is then carefully removed and placed on a felt surface. The felt removes the excess water while ensuring the paper retains its shape when it is pressed dry.

The titles of my work are very important as they give the audience clues into my process of making and my references. The work, made on couched khadi paper, is titled Lexicon. In broad terms, 'lexicon' means 'language', a dictionary or a branch of knowledge. My work Lexicon is made by punching various shaped dies and cutting tools into paper, creating holes of various sizes that compose distinct patterns. Through the punches and holes, I have made a vocabulary of hieroglyphs, for pictorial symbols that represent words. The shapes and structure of the work may appear random, but on closer inspection, they speak to each other. By looking at the work slowly and repeatedly, similarities, patterns, and rhythms appear.

Similarly, in my work Warp and Weft, the title gives clues about the process of making the work and the terminology of textiles. Warp and weft are the two basic components used in weaving to turn thread into fabric. The warp is the lengthwise threads that are held tight and immobile on a loom, while the transverse weft is drawn through and inserted over and under the warp.

By punching holes in my two works Lexicon and Khadi, I make visual references to nineteenth century Jacquard loom cards, first invented by Joseph-Marie Jacquard in 1804. The loom cards revolutionised textile production by simplifying the process of weaving intricate patterns through the use of punch cards containing a pattern, which was then read by a 'card reader' on a loom. The punch cards were an important influence on early processes of computing: they inspired Charles Babbage, often considered the 'father of the computer,' when he designed an early computational machine in the 1830s. The idea of punch cards continued to inform computing up to the twentieth century, as they were commonly used in early data processing machines. By referencing the punch card technique of the Jacquard loom, my works examine language, textiles, and computing as different kinds of symbolic and material systems.



Top: The Swaraj Flag of 1931, the symbol of the independence movement.

Bottom: the National Flag of India 1947.

GANDHI'S VISIT TO DARWEN

In 1931, Gandhi attended the Second Round Table Conference in London to decide on the future status of India. He then travelled to Darwen on the invitation of mill owners in the city. At the time, Gandhi's Swadeshi movement was in full swing. As Gandhi promoted self-reliance and the use of India-made goods, the boycott on British cloth created considerable economic damage to Blackburn's local textile industry. As a result, many mills closed and workers faced unemployment. The Blackburn mill owners believed they could lobby him to stop the boycott.

During Gandhi's visit, he met many local mill workers and labour leaders, and addressed a public gathered at the Co-Operative Hall. During his meetings, he acknowledged the economic burden faced by mill workers, while explaining the necessity of India's struggle for independence from colonialism.

To the mill owners' surprise, he was received with sympathy and support from local workers. His visit highlighted material alliances between industrial workers and colonised people, creating new alliances in a transnational struggle against exploitative and destructive systems.

Coinciding with the 90th anniversary of Gandhi's visit to Darwen, I worked with Blackburn-born filmmaker Sima Gonsai to make a short film about the Khadi movement. The film documented the various stages of my studio work, woven together with the stories, themes, and voices of those involved in textile production and the struggle for India's independence.

Through a process of archival research, Sima and I drew connections between Gandhi, the Lancashire region, and the wider subject of cotton. We visited the Cotton Famine Road in Rochdale, various Lancashire mills, and interviewed Sima's father, Ranjitgiri Gonsai, who is a former textile mill worker. These intertwined scenes narrated the story of cotton's role in Indian independence.

We filmed the exterior of the 'Blue Plaque' house in Springfield Village Darwen, where Gandhi stayed overnight. There, we interviewed Councillor Eileen Entwistle, the granddaughter of a woman in the iconic photograph of millworkers cheering Gandhi.



The making of Lexicon. Film still from Khadi. Cotton, Colonialism and Resistance by Bharti Parmar and Sima Gonsai, 2021.

All the scenes are interwoven with images of my hands, punching, hammering, and making the artworks featured in the exhibition. Combining sounds, textures, and archival images, the film composes a visual sense of place, time, and heritage rooted in the Khadi movement.

In a small cabinet, I assembled ephemera relating to Gandhi's sea journey to England in 1931, including a replica of his spinning wheel. The SS Rajputana, which Gandhi sailed on to reach England, was later torpedoed and sunk off Iceland on 13 April 1941.



Top: Gandhi in Darwen Saturday 26th September 1931 with Mary Walsh, grandmother of Cllr Eileen Entwistle, Mayor of Blackburn 1992-1993. Image: Community History & Archives Blackburn Central Library.

Bottom: Cllr Eileen Entwistle talking about her grandmother meeting Gandhi. Film still from Khadi.



Cabinet of Gandhi ephemera including photograph of spinning on the SS Rajputana, model of charkha spinning wheel and a hank of hand spun cotton with calligraphy labels. Image: Harry Meadley.

ENQUIRIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

Through a sustained focus on the simple material of cotton, Bharti Parmar's work *Khadi* traces a multi-layered story of the British Empire in India and India's fight for independence – as well as the ways these histories continue to ramify today. Parmar's work teases out the political, economic, social, and geographic dimensions of empire and anti-colonial struggle, showing how these histories were as central to shaping Britain as India today.

The following Enquiries invite students to engage with Parmar's work in order to ask: How can historians study experiences of empire? Why are textiles valuable sources for studying history? They can present students with new perspectives on their studies of industrialisation and the British Empire, while connecting these topics to contemporary issues. They can be conducted with the Powerpoint accompanying this booklet.

Enquiry 1:

Why are textiles valuable sources for studying history?

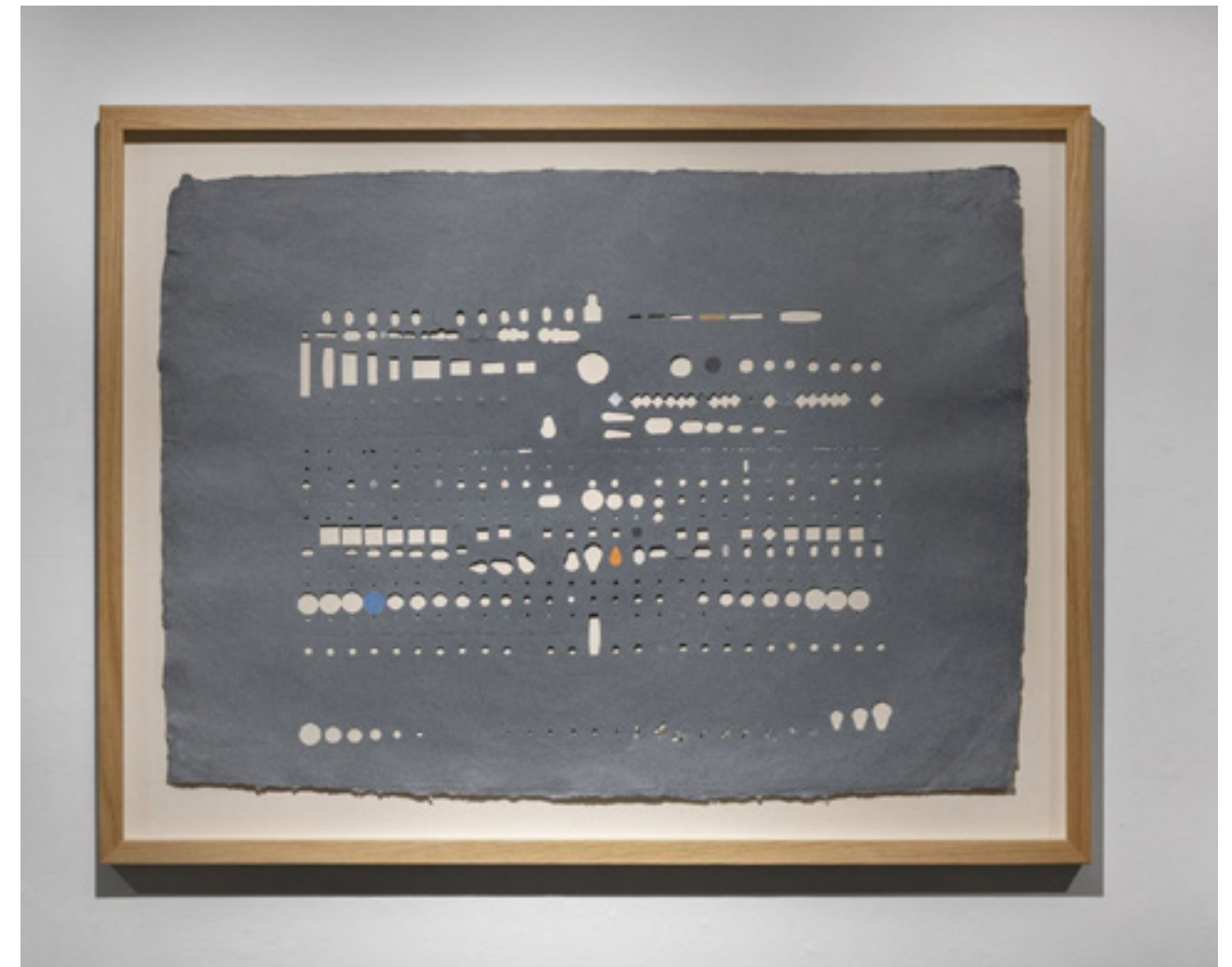
Activity 1: Histories of Khadi

Review Bharti Parmar's installation *Khadi* by showing students the powerpoint accompanying this booklet and/or watching the short film about the work [online here](#). [1]

Working in pairs or groups, ask students to consider: why does the artist work with textiles? What histories does khadi convey?

Activity 2: Textile as historical material

We typically think about historical sources as written records: travel narratives, government files, newspapers, etc. What does it mean to use textiles as a historical source?



Bharti Parmar, *Lexicon*, 2021. Punched drawing on khadi recycled paper. Image: Harry Meadly.

Show students Parmar's work *Lexicon*. Ask them to consider: what does the work make you think of? How do you think it was made? Why is it titled the way it is?

Define the word 'lexicon' and explain how the artist produced the work. Ask students to consider: are there similarities between language and textiles? Could we "read" textiles like we read language?

Activity 3: Textile as cartography

We might think of textiles as static material, but in fact they are constantly in motion. Textiles move with us when we wear them as clothes, but before that the raw materials and processed fabric typically traverse multiple countries. This activity asks students to consider how textiles can tell us about geographic and economic connections between different places.



Show students the world map in the slides accompanying this booklet. Alternatively, you could use maps or globes in the classroom. On the map, ask students to trace the journey that the paper used for Bharti Parmar's artworks travels, noting the various stops it makes.

Ask students to reflect on the processes and people involved in making the materials at each stage. What do they do with the material? How does the material connect the various people involved in its journey? How would you characterise these connections?

Ask students to consider the history of cotton during India's independence movement. Compare the geographic journey made by the paper used in Parmar's artworks to the journey made by (1) British-made cotton during the British Empire and (2) khadi produced in India during the independence movement. What does this comparison tell us about the impact of empire today?

Enquiry 2:

How can historians study experiences of empire?

Activity 1: Whose Histories? Which sources?

Britain's colonisation of India shaped social, cultural, and religious life, the economy, systems of governance, and other everyday phenomena in fundamental ways – both in India, and in Britain. These processes of colonisation affected different kinds of people in vastly different ways. Traditional historical records of these experiences are, however, much more limited: while there exist extensive records by colonial governments and scholarship produced by British people about India, such sources are inevitably shaped by British colonial perspectives. Some of these records were produced by Indian people who worked for the colonial administration, as the British Empire did attempt to create a class of indigenous administrators who could act as mediators between colonised people and colonial rulers. By and large, however, these written records do not reflect the varied experiences and knowledges of people with different levels of access to literacy, such as agricultural and industrial workers in both Britain and India.

Using Bharti Parmar's film about Gandhi's visit to Darwen and the wider Khadi movement, prompt students to consider the kinds of sources about this historic event and the perspectives that they represent.

Introduce students to Parmar's film by sharing the description above and/or reviewing the powerpoint presentation together. For additional context, you could also show students [video of Gandhi's visit](#), and share the description on [Global Threads](#), which includes a number of first hand reflections. [2, 3]

Working individually or in groups, ask students to identify various kinds of historical sources we might be able to use to better understand this event. These could include film documentation of Gandhi's visit, newspaper articles and oral history narratives, as well as objects of material culture such as cotton, both the khadi produced in India and the manufactured cotton produced in Lancashire.

For each possible historical source that students have identified, ask them to consider whose perspective(s) the source might best convey.

Next, ask students to consider Parmar's film as a way of reflecting on history. Does Parmar's film convey only one perspective, or multiple? Could artworks provide a different kind of historical understanding than traditional history books – how and why, or why not?

Activity 2: Entangled Histories – Gandhi in Darwen

Studying the impact that the British Empire had in other regions and countries can sometimes obscure the way that the British Empire shaped the UK at the same time. Studying events such as Gandhi's visit to Darwen foreground the ways that empire fundamentally shaped the British metropole at the same time as it shaped colonised territories. Highlighting these historical entanglements also emphasises the ways that decolonisation was and is necessarily a mutual process. The breakdown of empire abroad also entailed transformations in metropolitan society – a process that did not end when British colonies achieved formal political independence.

Engaging with Parmar's film and any further resources on the khadi movement you have shared, ask students to identify all of the points they can where British and Indian experiences of empire intersect in this event.

Next, ask students to consider how these experiences affected different people in different ways. Students should consider not only how they affected people in India and Britain differently, but also how they affected people in different social positions in Britain and India.

Finally, ask students to reflect on the following question in writing or discussion: why do you think that Gandhi was able to gain the support of mill workers in Darwen?

Activity 3: Collaging the Archive

Invite students to make their own artwork in response to the topics and histories they have engaged here.

Working in groups or pairs, ask students to identify 5-10 images and documents online related to the topics of the lesson. These could include khadi, Gandhi's visit to Darwen, Indian independence; but also computing, the fashion industry, shipping, etc.

Provide students with additional paper or cardstock, scissors, glue, and markers. Students can cut up the printed materials that they have found and collage them together into a work that conveys their reflections on the topics discussed. Students should give their works a title.

Invite students to share their works by creating a gallery in the classroom. After students have tapped their works up around the classroom or displayed them on their desks, invite students to go around the room in small groups. Students can consider the following questions as they look at their classmates' work: What do the images, colours, and forms make you think of? What topics does the work address? Why do you think it is titled the way it is?

Come together for a final class reflection. Ask each pair/group of students to present their reflections about one collage work to the class. Finally, ask students to consider: how can making an artwork be a way of learning about history?

Endnotes:

[1] Bharti Parmar: Khadi, 2021. Huckleberry Films. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsCma7NbmbI>

[1] Gandhi in Lancashire, British Movietone, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCKGmlBxwYw>

[2] Sibia Akhtar, 'A Visitor in Lancashire', Global Threads, <https://globalthreadsmcr.org/a-visitor-in-lancashire/>

CREDITS

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