



Gandhi's Customer Strategy: The Last Come Firstⁱ

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In recent years, the notion of "putting the last first" has gained currency as sound business and corporate strategy. Best-selling titles in this vein include *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid* (Prahalad, 2004), *Capitalism at the Crossroads* (Hart & Gore, 2007), and *Creating a World Without Poverty: Social Business and the Future of Capitalism*, authored by Nobel-prize winner Muhammad Yunus, the father of the global microlending revolution. Theoretically, these works argue that social, material, and environmental well-being are inextricably linked, and a praxis centered on "putting the last first" represents a tide that lifts all boats, whether luxury yachts or balsa canoes.

When it comes to the notion of "putting the last first," Mahatma Gandhi was the

quintessential believer, theoretician, and practitionerⁱⁱ. Once a British reporter mockingly asked him: "Mr. Gandhi, why are your train journeys in India in Third-Class? Surely, you could afford first-class?" Gandhi's polite response: "I travel Third Class because there is no Fourth Class."

Gandhi's yardstick for action was simple: "Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest person whom you have seen, and ask yourself if the next step you contemplate is going to be of any use to that person."ⁱⁱⁱ

What implications does the Gandhian praxis of "putting the last first" hold for those that value an integrated approach to social, material, and environmental well-being? The present article

poses that question to the reader as it narrates the Gandhian experience.

**Gandhi's concern for focusing on the "last" was greatly sharpened when, in 1904, as a practicing attorney in South Africa, he encountered John Ruskin's essay (penned originally in 1860) titled *Unto This Last*^{iv}. In his writing, Ruskin challenged the commonly-accepted *laissez-faire* tenets of classical economics, arguing for a more ethical and humane basis for political, economic, and social action. So taken was Gandhi by Ruskin's (at that time "revolutionary") ideas, that he translated *Unto This Last* into Gujarati (his native language) in 1908 titling it *Sarvodaya*, meaning "Well Being of All".

The actionable component of *Sarvodaya* was premised on a state of well-being for the poor, the marginalized, and the overlooked. He labeled the poor as *daridranarayan* (poor but godly) and the low-caste untouchables as *harijans* (children of god). When traveling, he consciously lived in *harijan* neighborhoods, drank from their wells, cleaned their latrines, and escorted them to Hindu temples, a place that was out-of-bounds for them. He would argue: "How could children of God not be welcome in God's home?" For Gandhi, serving the "last" also meant "reducing himself to zero." That is, a life of no possessions and voluntary simplicity. It meant traveling Third-Class, no unnecessary expenditures, and hard manual labor under the hot sun.

An analysis of Gandhi's mass campaigns against British colonial rule would show his overriding focus on addressing the conditions of the poorest-of-the-poor. Let's take the case of India's textile industry. Up until the late 18th century, until the Industrial Revolution gathered "steam" in England, cloth production was India's premier industry, a major employer, and revenue generator. However, the policies of the British East India trading company and later the British colonial administration systematically destroyed the spinning and dying of cotton cloth by Indian businessmen, moving cloth manufacturing to

their mills in Manchester and Leeds. The result was massive unemployment and poverty in India, and a ruralization of India as former clothing workers were forced to move back to villages.

In response to oppressive British colonial practices, Gandhi made hand-spun, hand-woven cloth (*khadi*) the centerpiece of his program for Indian independence.^v He spun his own yarn on a *charkha* (spinning wheel) each day, and urged the poor, the unemployed, and people from all walks of life to do the same. *Khadi* was a quintessential communication message, a daily statement made by (rather, worn by) all Indians, cutting across caste, religious, region, and social class differences. Its mass appeal -- especially for the poor, rural, and marginalized in India -- was *swadeshi*, the production of, and pride in, indigenous products (signifying self-reliance). The Indian National Congress, at Gandhi's urging, voted to require its officers and workers to spin and wear *khadi* and to boycott foreign cloth. The spinning wheel was adopted as the symbol of the National Congress, and placed in the center of the party's flag.



Gandhi spinning his *charkha*^{vi}

Gandhi's famous Salt March (covering 241 miles over 24 days) of 1930 to protest British taxation on salt was also couched as a protest of 350 million poor Indians. Gandhi argued that

much like water and air, salt was a naturally-available commodity essential for survival. Everyone needed salt and, if anything, the poor – who toiled in the fields under the hot sun – needed it more than the rich. In essence, the British tax laws on salt were framed by Gandhi as being especially unjust and unfair for the poorest-of-the-poor. It was thus an appropriate symbol for organizing the teeming and disenfranchised masses against oppressive British colonial policies. Salt, much like khadi, was a quintessential communicative symbol of mass protest, a protest which Gandhi labeled as one of “right against might.”



A painting of Gandhi's 1930 salt march^{vii}

For Gandhi, focusing on the “last” was an exercise in both politics and spirituality, two arenas that were inseparable. Means and ends were intertwined. “How many children do you have, Mrs. Gandhi?” a reporter asked Kasturba.

Gandhi's wife. “I have four,” she noted. Then pointing to her husband, she said: “But he has 400 million.” She added: “They call him *Bapu* (Father) and *Rastrapitah* (Father of the Nation)”.

*** What value does the Gandhian praxis of “putting the last first” hold for an integrated business strategy that focuses, simultaneously, on the social, material, and environmental?

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Endnotes

This draws partially on the author's previous writings on Gandhi, especially in Papa, Singhal, and Papa (2006); and Singhal (2008).

See Gandhi (1994); Fischer (2002); and Homer (1956).

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