

FILM

The Spinning Experience: Hand Spinning as Pedagogy, Experiential Learning, and Physical Output

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While the spinning wheel, known in many Indian languages as the *charkha*, continues to be an integral part of modern India's imagination (Gandhi made it a symbol of self-reliance and freedom), very few people have actually seen the object, leave alone having worked with it. There is also a huge discussion on the (ir)relevance of this technology in modern times because it is hand driven, slow, and low on output and productivity. Is the *charkha* then an obsolete and irrelevant technology? Is it a slow and unproductive relic of the past that we remember only because of Gandhi or his central role in India's freedom struggle? Can it play any role at all in the many crises we are facing today?

The Spinning Experience follows thirty students at the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay as they learn the slow and gentle art of hand spinning on the *charkha* in a three-day workshop which is part of a course I teach titled Technology, Society and Development. One sees a churn of the narrative as the workshop progresses—through a combination of discussion and debate but more importantly experiential learning and the possibility of creating tacit knowledge and understanding. Learning unfolds in unexpected ways. The yarn breaks regularly but then the rhythm begins to set in and new understandings are created for ideas of skill, labour, history, craft, and sustainability. The highlight of course is a small length of cotton yarn (one hundred to two hundred meters on average) students take with them as a real, tangible output of what they have created themselves.

The idea of the film originated from my experience of conducting this three-day workshop for the preceding five semesters. The transformation one saw in the short span of the three days—students join the workshop for ninety minutes on three consecutive days each—was both quite remarkable and fascinating. There was on the one hand a demonstration of how learning happens by doing and then there is the output itself. By output I mean both the physical yarn that is created and also the experiences the students go through. Some of this was reflected in short assignments students subsequently wrote on the experience of doing the workshop.

I felt this experience could/should be captured in real time and not only through a post-facto reflection. Filming the workshop as it unfolded offered that opportunity, and it helps that I am trained as a filmmaker. The approach was ethnographic and instinctive—I had a sense this could be a film, but that was not the plan and neither was I sure how it would turn out finally. I thought of a film only when I saw the call from *KULA*, and I would say in retrospect that my instinct about the possibility of a film did turn out to be right. It helped hugely of course that I found a willing and deeply empathetic collaborator in Pradeep Patil when he agreed to edit and actually put the film together.

The few public screenings I have had of the film (all incidentally in educational institutions) have drawn an unexpectedly warm and positive response and given me much confidence and hope. We are also entering the film into documentary film festivals and while we do not know what the outcomes will be, we are hopeful it will be well received in this community as well.

Keywords: charkha; hand spinning; spinning wheel; cotton; yarn; Gandhi; technology

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Watch [The Spinning Experience: Hand Spinning as Pedagogy, Experiential Learning, and Physical Output](#).

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Competing Interests

The filmmaker has no competing interests to declare.

Ethics and Consent

The workshop was initially filmed only for the purposes of creating a record. There was no intention of making a film and/or of a public screening. A decision to attempt a film was made much later, primarily in response to the call by *KULA* for multimodal contributions.

Those students whose interviews appear in the film were subsequently informed that these snippets would appear in a short film being made on the workshop. They were asked for explicit permission for the use of their interviews in the film, which was granted by them. The spinning teacher too similarly provided his consent following a similar request.

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