

THE INDIAN CHARKHA SPINNING WHEEL

BOOK SIZE

IMPORTED FROM INDIA BY
NEW VOYAGER TRADING
Thomasville, GA 31792

The word “charkha” literally means “wheel”. During Gandhi’s time there was in India a strong movement to promote self-sufficiency. A box spinning wheel was designed and made compact enough so that every Indian family could own one and spin the yarn for their own cloth. Gandhi himself contributed to the design of the charkha by adding an accelerated wheel drive for greater speed. On many occasions, he would spin and recommend spinning to others, saying it would bring them peace of mind. Cotton spinning was also meant as a political snub of the colonial British rule.



About the Wheel

When opening your charkha, you should observe how all the different parts are placed; they will need to be placed in exactly the same manner after spinning in order for you to be able to close the case.

Place the short all-metal arm on top of the larger wheel and the wooden triangle handle on top of the metal arm. This is your drive wheel crank. Lock in place. Lift off each of the wheels in turn and oil their axle with household 3-in-one or similar oil. Replace the wheels and make sure the heavy cotton band going from the larger wheel to the pulley of the small wheel fits tightly. You can adjust this.

The wooden slat with metal end can serve as a clamp if you sit cross-legged on the floor to spin as they do in India: place the metal end over the edge of the case near the main drive wheel and rest a foot on the wooden arm to keep the case steady. To use the charkha on a table, you will need a C-clamp or something to prevent the box from moving.

Unlock one of the spindles and place it in the groove cut across the “mouse trap” (wooden “U-shaped part in front of the spindles). This will result in a slight downward angle to the spindle. The spindle should be placed on top of the cotton thongs which act as bearings; the thongs should be oiled; the metal pulley and leather disk of the spindle should be located in the middle of the “mouse trap”; the metal disk should be facing you outside the “trap.” If you like, put some glue behind it so it does not rub against the spindle support.

Place the thin cotton drive band (which should be spliced rather than knotted for smooth spinning; or use a stretch drive band) in the groove of the small wheel and on the metal pulley of the spindle. The spindle support should be held vertically by the tension of the drive band alone. Adjust the tension on the drive band by moving the “mouse trap” right or left. Test by turning the drive wheel crank; the spindle should rotate smoothly and the belt should not slip. Rotate the “trap” as needed for the proper angle. You are now ready to spin!

Spinning on the Charkha

You may want to consider adding a Speed Kit to the wheel. This replaces the 2 cotton drive bands with seamless elastic material that grips well and allows the drive wheels and spindle to rotate without bumps. Contact your dealer.

The charkha works on the same principle as the great wheel or “walking” wheel. You will be spinning off the tip of the spindle as you crank in one direction. As yarn is made, you reverse your crank direction slightly and “store” the yarn at the back of the spindle.

Making a puni: You can use any fine or short fiber on the charkha; cotton is generally the easiest to start with; it can be spun from uncarded fiber or from carded sliver or a puni. Puni are widely used in India and may be available at your spinning supply store. You can also make your own: card some cotton with cotton carders; lay the resulting lap on a flat surface and roll it tightly around a dowel. Pull the dowel out and you have a puni.

Starting to spin: attach a starter yarn about 15” to 18” long to the spindle; lay the last inches of the yarn on top of the puni and hold the fibers lightly with your thumb. Turn the crank of the drive wheel slowly clockwise and let your thumb slip away from the spindle to draw out the fibers.

Two important things to remember: the drive wheel crank does not need to be turned very fast (the drive ratio is about 125 to 1) and you should use only the very lightest of pull against the spindle: draw the fibers back quickly as you crank.

Spinning methods: One method of spinning is to draw out and spin all at once as you would on any spinning wheel and as is done in India. Another is to draw out and at the end of the draw (which is limited by the length of your arm), when your yarn is fairly even, then set the twist by pinching the yarn and turning the wheel until you have the amount of twist you need. Error on the side of too much twist as you begin.

Winding On: Still holding the yarn, reverse the drive wheel slowly about 1/4 turn and bring the yarn off the spindle tip to the back of the spindle. Turn the wheel clockwise again and wind the yarn onto the spindle bringing it back towards the tip to continue spinning.

If you have trouble spinning, try the different operations with a length of spun yarn or with some pencil roving until you feel comfortable. Spinning on a charkha requires some practice but once you have caught on, you will be surprised at how fast you can spin. Enjoy your charkha and may you find the peace of mind Gandhi spoke of!

The Skeinwinder

The multi-sided wooden piece in the right half of the case has 2 small metal prongs which fit onto the smaller drive wheel. Place the 4 metal arms in the holes of the wooden piece and you have your skeinwinder. When using the skeinwinder, you will need to remove the drive wheel crank. Turn the skeiner by hand. The short wooden arm with metal eye attached (located left of the “mouse trap”) is used to thread the yarn from the spindle onto the skeinwinder.

Note: Your charkha was made in India using local talent and for the local market. What is imported is of the style and quality you would find in India. As such, the charkha may have writing, squiggle lines and some rough appearance on the wood or other parts. This is the true Indian Charkha; it has not been altered for a Western “finished” look. Appreciate this character as the real thing.