Defining Swadeshi Movement

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Abstract

The Swadeshi Movement of Bengal was an epoch in the history of India. It had its genesis in the partition of Bengal in 1905 but it brought in its fold major political trends that proved to be an integral part of the freedom struggle in the years to come. The ideas of Boycott and Swadeshi that emerged from this movement became an important weapon that was utilised in the freedom struggle. It was a trendsetter not only in the political arena, Indian society opened up in the fields of art, literature, music and science. The innovations in different forms of mass mobilisation, changes in the educational structues and the different art forms, all were touched by this movement. It made people realise the true nature of the British rule in India. The paper is an attempt to study the novelty and effectiveness of the movement and the role it played in the cultural sphere. It is an attempt to analyse the role that this movement played in evolving the spirit of the freedom struggle.
Keywords: Boycott, Swadeshi, culture, passive resistance, partition.

> *"With the beginning of the Swadeshi Movement at the turn of the century, the Indian National Movement took a major leap forward. The next half a decade saw almost all the major political trends that was later on seen in the national movement. From conservative modernism to political extremism, from terrorism to incipient socialism, from petitioning and political speeches to passive resistance and boycott – all had their origin in the Swadeshi Movement. The richness of the movement was not confined to politics alone. The period saw a breakthrough in Indian art, literature, music, science as well as industry. The Indian society was experimenting and the creativity of people was expanding in every direction."This is how Aditya Mukherjee defines and summarises Swadeshi Movement in the book "India's Struggle for Independence."*[1]

Swadeshi is a Hindi word which in turn is derived from the Sanskrit. It is a conjunction of two Sanskrit words viz 'Swa' which means 'self or own' and 'desh' which means 'country'. Swadesh thus means 'own country' and Swadeshi is 'of one's own country.' The idea of partition for sdministrative convenience was not a novelty of this age. Discussion about partition had started at the time of Orissa famine of 1866. Assam was separated from Bengal in 1874. The proposal to transform Chittagong division to Assam came out in 1892 and again in 1896. The proposal to transform the districts of Dacca and Mymensingh to Assam was also laid. Both the proposals could not materialise. Initially the partition was meant only for administrative purposes. But things began to change during the time of Curzon.[2] In 1903, he planned the proposals for the transfer of Chittagong division, Dacca and Mymensingh division to Assam and Chotanagpur to the Central Provinces and in return Bengal would receive Sambalpur and the feudatory states from the Central Provinces but finally in the July 19, 1905 scheme, came a new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam with Chittagong, Dacca and Rajshahi as well as Tippera, Malda and Assam. Now the motive

was beyond administrative convenience. The motive was now to weaken the Congress and the National Movement. Since Bengal had become the centre of political activity, the decision to partition Bengal on the pretext of administrative convenience was taken. The nationalists clearly saw the motive behind the partition. In the annual session of the Indian National Congress held in Benaras in 1905, a call for Swadeshi was undertaken under the leadership of Gokhale.

The Swadeshi Movement had its genesis in the anti-partition movement which was launched to oppose the partition of Bengal. Bengal with its population of 78 million had become too big for administration.[3] this was the reason given by the Britishers to partition Bengal. But the leaders saw the main motive behind the partition. Indian nationalism was gaining strength and partition was expected to weaken what was perceived as the nerve-centre of Indian nationalism at that time. Under the scheme of partition, Bengal was put under two administrative divisions. First on the basis of language which reduced Bengalis to a minority with17 million Bengali speakers and 37 million Hindi and Oriya speakers. The second was on the basis of religion. This was the policy of propelling Muslim communalists as a counter to the Congress and the nationalist movement. Curzon in his speech in Dacca stated that with partition, Dacca could become the capital of the new Muslim province.

The partition sparked off a deep controversy among historians with the Apologists tending to emphasise administrative convenience as its prime motive against the nationalist charges of the deliberate policy of "divide and rule." The partition tended to curb the influence of Bengal. The partition was meant to foster a kind of division – a division on the basis of religion and thus hoping to arouse and enhance religious consciousness. The policy of propping up communist elements among Muslims as a counter to the Congress and the nationalist movement which was getting increasingly crystallised in the last quarter of the 19th century. With partition, Curzon argued, Dacca could become the capital of Muslim majority province. The Muslims would thus get a better deal and the eastern district would be free from the influence of Calcutta.[4] the Indian nationalists clearly saw the design behind the unpopular step and condemned it unanimously. The speech of Risley, the home secretary to the government "Bengal united is power, Bengal divided will in several different ways" clearly stated the diabolical designs of the Britishers. The anti-partition and the Swadeshi movement had begun. In Dec 1903, the partition proposals became public. Spontaneous protest followed. About 500 protest meetings were held in East Bengal alone after the first two month following the announcement. Numerous petitions were sent to the government of India as well as the Secretary of State. Even the big zamindars who were till now loyal supporters of the British Raj either joined forces with the British Raj or in some way or the other supported the movement.

During 1903-1905, the prominent leaders like Surendranath Bannerjee, K.K Mehta and Prithwichandra Roy led the movement in Calcutta. To create awareness among the masses, pamphlets were distributed and newspapers like Bengalee and Hitabadi took the message far and wide. This was the phase when the moderate techniques of petitions, memorandums, speeches, public meetings and press campaigns held sway. They hoped that this would yield sufficient pressure to prevent the injustice. No technique yielded sufficient pressure. The government remained unmoved and the decision to partition Bengal was announced on 19th July 1905. It was very obvious that the moderate techniques were not working and a different strategy was needed. During the protest meetings that followed, the decision to boycott foreign goods was taken for the first time. The formal proclamation of the Swadeshi Movement was taken on 7th August 1905. On 9th August 1905, the boycott resolution was undertaken in Calcutta Town Hall. On 1st Sept, the government announced that the partition was to be effected from 16th Oct 1905. On 16th Oct 1905, Surendranath Bannerjee and Anand Mohan Bose addressed a huge gathering a within a few hours,

Rs 50000 were raised for the Movement. The day partition took effect was declared as the day of mourning throughout Bengal. In Calcutta, a hartal took place. People brought out processions, walked barefoot, bathed in the Ganges and then paraded on the streets singing " Bande Mataram" – the theme song of the movement. People tied rakhi on each other's hand as a mark of solidarity of the two halves of Bengal.[5] The message of Swadeshi and boycott of foreign goods soon spread to the rest of the country.[6] The militant nationalists in the country were in favour extending the movement to the other parts of the country and extending it beyond the programme of boycott and Swadeshi to a full-fledged political mass struggle. The aim now became Swaraj. There was difference between the moderates and the extremists regarding the pace and techniques of the movement and ultimately along with other differences resulted in the Surat split. In Bengal after 1905, the extremists held a dominant influence over the Swadeshi Movement The technique of extended boycott was now to include the boycott of government schools and colleges, courts and titles as well as all government services. Strikes were also organised. The aim was now to make administration under the present circumstances impossible. Women refused to wear foreign bangles and clothes and use foreign utensils. Washermen refused to wash foreign clothes and even priests declined offerings which contained foreign sugar.

The movement made innovations in different forms of mass-mobilisations. Public meetings, processions and samities emerged as major methods of mass-mobilisation as well as popular expressions. The samities took the Swadeshi movement to the villages in the firm of melas to spread the message and organised relief measures during famines and epidemics.[7] The Swadeshi period witnessed the constructive use of melas and popular festivals as means of reaching out to the masses.[8] Another important aspect of the Swadeshi movement was the emphasis attached to self-reliance i.e atma-shakti as a necessary part of the struggle against the government. In Aug 1906, the National Council of Education was established. Another aspect of self-reliance was to set up Swadeshi or indigenous industries and institutions. Education in vernacular medium wad popularised. Bengal Institute of Technology was set up and funds were raised to send students to Japan for technical training.[9] The most marked influence of Swadeshi movement was in the sphere of culture. A significant advancement was seen in literature in general and Bengali literature in particular. In totality, the Swadeshi movement with its multifaceted programme and activity was able to draw large sections of society into the sphere of modern politics. Ashwini Kumar Dutta's Swadesh Bandhab Samiti became popular and played a vital role in creating awareness. Political consciousness was created through magic lantern lectures, Swadeshi songs, physical and moral training etc. Songs of Rabindranath Tagore, Rajanikant Sen, Mukund Sen and Dwijendralal Ray filled people's hearts with patriotism.[10] In the sphere of painting, Abanindranath Tagore broke the domination of Victorian naturalism over Indian art and took inspiration from Mughal, Ajanta and Rajput paintings. Nandalal Bose was the first recipient of scholarship of the Indian Society of Oriental Art in 1907. Jagjit Chandtra Bose and Prafullachandra Roy were the pioneers of research in Science. Students participated in large numbers in picketing. They were penalized by disqualifying them from competitive exams, jobs and scholarships if found guilty. Their grants were stopped and disciplinary action was taken against them. Yet, they took part in large numbers and their spirits could not be dampened. Women also took part in picketing.Inspite of all these measures, students boycotted Calcutta University which was known as Gulamkhana in those days. Volunteers were roughly handled and beaten by lathis. The official fhrase "Mild lathi charge' was a misnomer as it was not mild at all. Singing Bande Mataram became illegal in public.

The main drawback of the movement was not to be able to gather the support of Muslim majority especially the Muslim peasants. The British policy of consciously and deliberately using

communalism to turn the Muslims against the Swadeshis was responsible for this alienation from the movement. The situation of Bengal where Hindus and Muslims were divided along class lines with the former is the landlords and the latter constituting the peasantry. This was the period when the Muslim League was set up under the active guidance of the government.[11]Some of the mobilisation techniques adopted by the Swadeshis also had certain negative consequences which facilitated the arousal of communal feelings of alienation among the Muslims. The use of traditional festivals and customs was misinterpreted and distorted. By mid-1908, the movement with its popular mass character had spent itself out. Several factors were responsible for this. Firstly, the government seeing the potential of the movement came down on it with a heavy hand. Repression took the form of controls and bans on public meetings, processions and press. Secondly, the internal squabbles, especially the split in the Congress in 1907 weakened the movement. Thirdly, the movement lacked an effective organisation and party structure. Lastly, the movement partially declined due to the very logic of the mass movement i.e they cannot be sustained at the same pitch for a very long time especially when faced with severe repression.[12] However, the decline of the movement by mid-1908 engendered yet another trend in the Swadeshi phase – the rise of revolutionary terrorism. The Swadeshi Movement was the precursor of many trends that dominated the national struggle for freedom in the later years. It was a first mass movement. Several new methods were utilised to create awareness among people like samities and melas which became very popular. On the constructive side, due to boycott of foreign goods, indigenous industries progressed. Boycott of schools and colleges led to the development of national schools and colleges and the use of vernacular medium. Many secret revolutionary organisations emerged.

On the negative side, it led to a final split among the Hindus and Muslims. The deliberate policy of creating a rift between the two major communities of India had paid off. The next step towards this direction was the formation of the Muslim League. It also saw the beginning of the revolutionary phase which resulted in the split in the Congress. On the economic front, it became very successful. Do we need another Swadeshi movement in India now by embracing the knowledge and products of modern science and technology? Do we need to embrace the American model of free market capitalism? Foreign Direct Investment is increasing in India. Free market policy has already seen the decline of many small scale industries which has led to the impoverishment of a huge number of people. It is for the policy makers of India to decide wether India needs a revival of economic Swadeshi or increase FDI and extend it to areas where it has not reached before.

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