

Swadeshi movement



Swadeshi Movement emanated from the partition of Bengal, 1905 and continued up to 1908. It was the most successful of the pre-Gandhian movements. Initially the partition plan was opposed through an intensive use of conventional 'moderate' methods of press campaigns, numerous meetings and petitions, and big conferences at the Calcutta Town Hall in March 1904 and January 1905. The evident and total failure of such techniques led to a search for new forms - boycott of British goods, Rakhī Bandhan and Arandhan.

Theoretically, two major trends can be identified in the Swadeshi (Swadeshi) Movement - 'constructive Swadeshi' and political 'extremism'. 'Boycott' was the weapon to make Swadeshi movement successful. Constructive Swadeshi was the trend of self-help through Swadeshi industries, national schools and attempts at village improvement and organisation. This found expression through the business ventures of Prafulla Chandra Roy or Nilratan Sarkar, national education movement laid down by Satishchandra Mukherjee, and constructive work in villages through a revival of the traditional Hindu Samaj sketched out by Rabindranath Tagore.

Swadesh Bandhav Samity of Aswini Kumar Datta also played a major role in the effort for reconstruction. Rabindranath called such a perspective of development *atmashakti* (self-strengthening). This, however, had little appeal to the excited educated youth of Bengal who were drawn much more to the creed of political 'extremism'. Their fundamental difference with the preachers of constructive Swadeshi was over methods, and here the classic statement came from Aurobindo Ghosh in a series of articles in April 1907, later reprinted as 'Doctrine of Passive Resistance'.

He visualised a programme of 'organised and relentless boycott of British goods, officialised education, justice and executive administration', (backed up by the positive development of Swadeshi industries, schools and arbitration courts), and also looked forward to civil disobedience, 'social boycott' of loyalists, and recourse to armed struggle if British repression went beyond the limits of endurance. Another controversy arose over cultural ideas, between modernistic and Hindu revivalist trend. The Swadeshi mood in general was closely linked with attempts to associate politics with religious revivalism. Surendranath Banerjea claimed to have been the first to use the method of Swadeshi vows in temples. National education plans often had a strong revivalist content and 'boycott' was sought to be enforced through traditional caste sanctions. Such aggressive Hinduism often got inextricably combined in the pages of *Bande Mataram*, *Sandhya* or *Yugantar* while Brahmo journals like *Sanjibani* or *Prabasi* were critical of this view. The Hindu revivalist trend, together with the British propaganda that the new province would mean more jobs for Muslims did achieve considerable success in swaying upper and middle class Muslims against the Swadeshi movement.

Despite eloquent pleas for communal unity propagated by an active group of Swadeshi Muslim agitators like Ghaznavi, Rasul, Din Mahomed, Didar, Liakat Hussain etc there were communal riots in East Bengal. Some Hindu zamindars and mahajans started levying an *Ishvar Bhatti* for maintaining Hindu images. So a large section of the Muslim community in Bengal remained aloof from the Swadeshi movement and Hindu *bhadralok*, whether

believing in moderate or extremist politics, took leading part in the movement.

Such a limitation of the spontaneity of the movement caught the attention of Rabindranath and other men of letters. Rabindranath, though considerably swayed by revivalism for some years, under the impact of communal strife, pointed out in a series of remarkably perceptive articles in mid 1907 that simply blaming the British for the riots was quite an inadequate response. Together with these cultural limitations, the history of boycott and Swadeshi movement vividly illustrated the limits of an intelligentsia movement with broadly bourgeois aspirations but without as yet real bourgeois support.

Boycott achieved some initial success - thus the Calcutta collector of customs in September 1906 noted a decline in Manchester cloth sales. This decline had a lot to do with a quarrel over trade terms between Calcutta marwari dealers and British manufacturers. It is significant also that the sharpest decline was in items like shoes and cigarettes where the demand was mainly from middle class Indian gentlemen. In spite of such limitations the Swadeshi mood did bring about a significant revival in handloom, silk weaving, and some other traditional crafts. Also a number of attempts to promote modern industries were taken.

Thus the 'Banga Lakshmi Cotton Mills' was launched in August 1906 and there were some fairly successful ventures in porcelain, chrome, soap, matches and cigarettes. A considerable variety may be noticed within the national education efforts in Swadeshi Bengal, ranging from plans for vernacular technical teaching to santiniketan of Rabindranath and dawn

society of Satish Mukherjee. These were plans to combine the traditional and the modern in a scheme for 'higher culture' for selected youths. National Society of Education was set up as a parallel university in March 1906.

Though National Education with its negligible job prospects failed to attract the bulk of students, still some institutions like Bengal National College or Bengal Technical Institute survived after a couple of years. The emergence of Samitis was an achievement of the Swadeshi age. By 1908, most of these Samitis were quite open bodies engaged in a variety of activities - physical and moral training of members, social work during religious festivals, preaching the Swadeshi message through multifarious forms, organising crafts, schools, arbitration courts and village societies, and implementing the techniques of passive resistance.

The Swadeshi movement indirectly alienated the general Muslim public from national politics. They followed a separate course that culminated in the formation of the muslim league (1906) in Dacca. But it also helped to give a new dimension in the Indian nationalist movement by giving the anticipations of Gandhian mass satyagraha without the dogma of non-violence. [Ranjit Roy]