



## Partition of Bengal, Swadeshi Movement and the Role of Rabindranath Tagore

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**ABSTRACT:** In the history of colonial India an event of crucial importance was the Partition of Bengal in 1905 by the British government. Against this injustice and oppression a furious sedition upsurged among the national people but the government remained impervious to every appeal, plead and protest. The unamenable decision of government escalated the open hostility which culminated into Boycott resolution and the formal proclamation of Swadeshi Movement. The great poet-philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore initially joined the movement, delivering lectures and composing patriotic songs. But being an ardent worshipper of humanism and Ahimsa or non-violence, he found it difficult to accept the atrocities perpetrated by the nationalists which gradually turned the blazing fire of protest against partition into embers. So Tagore dissociated himself from the movement which was viewed by many of his critics as an act of betrayal. But his response to such criticism was fictionally articulated in his political novels where he firmly asserted that patriotism should always be centred around humanity.

**KEYWORDS:** boycott, partition, protest, Rabindranath Tagore, swadeshi

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### I. INTRODUCTION

From the vantage point of 21<sup>st</sup> century it is evident that the British Empire was the largest formal empire that invaded, annexed, occupied, divided and colonized various parts of the world. This aggressive imperial history of the Empire is periodised into two phases - the “first empire” stretching across the Atlantic towards America and West Indies, and the “second empire”, starting from around 1783 and extending towards Asia and Africa. British Imperialism had a large indelible impact on India as well. The British under the veil of civilizing mission and Enlightenment carried out their colonial policy which leaned more towards indirect rule in India through distinctive Governor-Generals and Viceroys. For the administrative convenience the British even ramified certain regions to create new provinces which naturally aroused agitation and insurgency among the indigenous people. Such an event of paramount significance was the Partition of Bengal 1905 in the history of colonial India. At that coeval time Calcutta was the capital city of Imperial rule. The Bengalis initiated the first organized insurrection against the partition most popularly known as Banga Bhanga Andalan (Anti-Partition Movement) as they realised the exigency of their existence.

### II. SCHEME OF PARTITION OF BENGAL

The Partition of Bengal by the British government was not an impulsive decision. Behind the ostensible argument of ‘administrative convenience’ the real motive of the government was political and economic. In contrast to other provinces in India, the voice of politically conscious Bengalis against the injustice and oppression inflicted by the British was vigorously articulated. In different sectors of government institutions like law, education and other administrative departments the Bengalis were employed in large scales. So naturally the diplomatic, avaricious, astucious and cunning face of the colonial government was austere unmasked before the Bengalis who then organized an upsurge against the diabolic policies of the government. As a consequence, the dissension between the British and Bengalis gradually intensified. Thus the political motive behind the scheme of Partition was to cut the stem of the rising tide of nationalism in Bengal.

The then Governor-General and Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon (1899-1905) the epitome of “intellectual imperialism”, believing that the Indians themselves have no meaningful place except as recipients of British beneficence, felt the need to brush aside the Indian intellectuals and nationalists who claimed to lead the mass. He became hostile to Indian nationalism and under him the Bengali nationalism confronted terrible opposition. Sir Andrew Fraser, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal proposed the Partition of Bengal (a vast

province comprising of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa) in a note on 28 March 1903. Lord Curzon's original plan of partition was published in Gazette of India 12 December 1903 that proposed the transfer of Chittagong Division, Dhaka, Mymensingh district and hill tracts of Tripura to Assam and Chota Nagpur to the Central Provinces, in exchange Bengal received Sambalpur, Ganjam, Visakhapatnam and parts of Madhya Pradesh. It became quite evident that the real motive behind this plan was purely a politically motivated affair, the same 'divide and rule' policy often implemented by the Raj to expand and secure the empire. H. H. Risley said, "Bengal united is power; Bengal divided will pull several different ways".(155) Thus the partition was intended to curb and weaken Bengali influence by reducing them to minority in two newly administrative provinces with Muslim majority in East Bengal and Oriya and Hindi speaking people in the Western part. In this way the Bengali Muslims were separated from Bengali Hindus. Another reason behind the partition was to foster another kind of division based on religion that is spurring the Hindu Muslim conflict. The greatest weapon of perpetual imperialism was to sow the seed of hatred between the two communities to weaken the pillars of solidarity and national integrity of the people. Curzon secretly wanted to accomplish the whole task. But it did not remain a secret and even before its announcement in 1905, the Bengalis expressed their opposition discontent and agitation, anticipating the consequence of this partition.

### **III. FIRST PHASE OF ANTI-PARTITION MOVEMENT AND TAGORE'S ROLE**

With the official announcement of the partition a furious sedition among the national people broke out. The leading newspapers of Calcutta at that time - The Bengali, Amrita Bazaar Patrika, The Hindu Patriot protested against this partition. But unfortunately no protest, plead, petition or entreat could alter the government decision. The government remained impervious to every appeal. This emanated in the vexed Bengalis a strong sense of nationalism and the movement of freedom struggle took a new momentum. Surendranath Bannerjee, the renowned political leader, Sobriquet 'Rashtraguru' stated "We object to the proposed dismemberment of Bengal and we are sure the whole country will rise as one man to protest against it" (Sen 91). On 16 October 1905 the protest against the partition reached its apotheosis. The day was considered as a national mourning day, a general strike was declared - all the shops were shuttered, public vehicles halted and people fasted. In the morning people walked bare foot chanting "Vande Mataram" or "I bow to the Motherland" took a bath in sacred Ganga and then irrespective of caste and religion tied Rakhi on each other's hand as a symbol of unity. Rabindranath Tagore, the most famous poet-philosopher of the time at that moment of crisis asserted "Education" and "Unity" as the two sole reasons he wanted to propagate by joining this movement. By singing patriotic songs in a procession and tying Rakhi on everyone's hand Kaviguru evoked the spirit of national sentiment in the heart of every people who gained vigour, vitality, strength, solidarity and an aspiration to achieve freedom. Thus Tagore's essay Banga Bibhag (Partition of Bengal) vividly gives a pictorial description of how the presence of Visva Kavi changed the face of this movement. How the presence of Tagore enlightened the national movement on that morning, has been depicted by his nephew Abanindranath in Gharoya. His famous swadeshi song "Banglar Mati, Banglar Jol" ("The earth of Bengal, the water of Bengal") became an epitome of Hindu-Muslim solidarity. It was under his initiation an assembly was organized on 27<sup>th</sup> September in Sabitri Library where Rakhi Bandhan festival was proposed and this song was written on this occasion. Tagore stated that Rakhi Bandhan was a spirit of unity.

Tagore himself posted cards and rakhis to many of his acquaintances. Rakhi and rakhi strings were sold from Bhandar office in Cornwallis Street. In this context mention must be made of the revolutionary leader of Anushilan Samiti, Jibantara Halder who in an interview admitted - "In the year 1905 the heart touching patriotic songs of Tagore immensely influenced me" (Mitra 284). "O amar desher mati tomar paaye thekai matha" ("O my motherland! I bow to thee") became a slogan of the movement. These nationalist songs are the objectification of the patriotic fervour of the revolutionaries.

In this period of crisis Ramendra Sundar Trivedi urged the Bengalis to stop bemoaning. On that day an assembly was organised to lay the foundation stone of "Federation Hall" were Ashutosh Chowdhury read his declaration letter:

Whereas the Government has thought fit to effectuate the partition of Bengal in spite of the universal protest of the Bengali nation, we hereby pledge and proclaim that we, as a people, shall do everything in our power to counteract the evil effects of the dismemberment of our province and to maintain the integrity of our race. (Agarwal 109)

Tagore participated in this meeting and at the end of this assembly all the people along with Tagore singing swadeshi song marched from Upper Circular road to Bagh Bazar to visit Pashupatinath Basu's abode. At this juncture the partition instead of dividing the Bengali society brought into existence a "swadeshi coalition" by further consolidating the political alliance between the Calcutta leaders and their East Bengal followers which was nothing less than a revolution in the political structure of Bengal society.

### **III. THE GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF SWADESHI AND BOYCOTT MOVEMENT**

On 13 July 1905 the vernacular newspaper Sanjivan edited by Krishna Kumar Mitra expressed open hostility and declared boycott against the British government. The unamenable decision of the government escalated the protest meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> July in Bagherhat town of Khulna district and on 21<sup>st</sup> July under the chairmanship of Maharaja of Dinajpur the boycott resolution and formal proclamation of Swadeshi Movement were accepted. The agenda of the movement was - all the honorary members of magistrate, employees of district board, municipality and panchayet (village council) would resign and for the next one year national mourning would be perpetuated by the grief-stricken, disheartened Bengalis. Leaders like Surendranath Banerjee, Motilal Ghosh, Kali Prasad, Prithwish Chandra Roy were noteworthy figures who launched a powerful press campaign against partition during the first phase of the movement. The boycott was mainly an economic weapon aimed to strike a pecuniary loss by discarding British goods. Like the Boycott, the Swadeshi dealt a severe blow to the British economy and ushered the growth for economic regeneration of Indian industries and enterprise.

The movement can be considered as the first popular revolt ensuring participation of different sections of people - students, women, lower middle class, zamindars and peasants. The Bengalis shunned foreign clothes, lawyers ceased attending courts, students boycotted schools and colleges and the Swadeshi movement became a great anti-British force. Students played a significant role - bonefiring foreign clothes and plunging into social activities as members of distinct organised samitis, namely, Brati Samiti, Sanatan Samparadai, Bande Mataram, Dawn Society, Anushilan Samiti and Jugantar. They propagated the swadeshi message to the remotest villages through magic lantern of lectures and swadeshi songs which genuinely alarmed the British officialdom. In the cultural sphere swadeshi ushered in a new era in Bengali literature. Famous litterateurs like Rabindranath Tagore, Rajanikanta Sen, Dwijendralal Roy, Girish Chandra Ghosh and others composed patriotic songs, plays, essays which gave new impetus to nationalist sentiments. Rabindranath's "Amar Sonar Bangla" inspired the liberation struggle of Bangladesh and even was adopted as the National Anthem of the country in 1971. Painting became national art and Abanindranath Tagore broke the domination of Victorian naturalism over Indian art and sought inspiration from indigenous tradition of Mughal, Rajput and Ajanta. Nandalal Basu and Asit Halder produced Fine Arts glowing with nationalist spirit. Prafulla Chandra Ray set up Bengal Chemical Factory. J N Tata founded Iron and Steel company. The Bengal Laksmi Mill and Mohini Mill, the two textile mills of the swadeshi era met the demands of cloth in Bengal. Bank, Insurance companies, ship-building industries and various other factories were established.

During this time Tagore presided over five assemblies where he delivered his speeches. He wrote extensively in Bhandar and Banga Darshan emphasising on fraternity and national consciousness. The greatest harvest of this period is the Baul songs written by Kaviguru which describe the picturesque natural beauty of Bengal, while some are national hymns aimed to evoke national spirit.

### **IV. THE SECOND PHASE OF ANTI-PARTITION MOVEMENT**

The second phase of Anti-Partition movement began on 22 October 1905 when Carlyle Circular was published in The Statesman newspaper. It was the declaration of slavery. It stated that all the schools and colleges that participated in the movement would be regarded as an act of indiscipline and their affiliation would be cancelled. To protest against this Circular a public meeting was organised in Field and Academy House under the presidentship of Abdul Rasul who scathingly flaked the government and took resolution to form National Council of Education. Tagore had been proposing for a long time to ostracise education from government law but since this was a plea from the poet and not from any influential politicians he was ignored. Within a few days in a meeting presided over by Rabindranath Tagore and attended by Bhupendranath Basu, Krishna Kumar Mitra, Satish Chandra Mukherjee, Monoranjan Guha Thakurta, Bipin Chandra Pal, a resolution was taken that the students if necessary would repudiate government institution but never abandon the Swadeshi movement. Tagore himself inebriately endorsed the students' active participation in the movement. In his essay 'Brata Dharan', he even envisaged that women shedding the household strictures should be associated to the national movement with undaunted courage. In a protest meeting in Dawn Society addressed by Rabindranath, Hirendranath Dutta, Satish Chandra Mukherjee, the idea of national education took a more concrete shape. Tagore's opinion was that if the students could not endure the denigration and ignominy of government universities and remain steadfast to their demand for national universities then the political leaders would be compelled to develop national education. But he also cautioned them not to keep too much expectation from these leaders. He further warned them not to follow parochial nationalism and if situation demanded they must travel to England to accomplish themselves and then dedicate their lives to build a better world for future generation.

1<sup>st</sup> November was declared the "Proclamation Day". In Rangpur district the students in protest uttered Bande Mataram and as a punishment almost two thousand students were fined to pay five thousand rupees as per the decree of Magistrate T. Emerson as it was made illegal to shout Bande Mataram in public places. Even in places the official phrase, "mild lathi charge" to describe the assault of the police, was a misnomer. It was

certainly not mild as the gaping wounds on the bodies loudly proclaimed. To oppose the government policy of regression of students an Anti-Circular Society was formed that encouraged students to join national universities. Krishna Kumar Mitra was assigned treasurer, Sachindranath Basu, the editor and Sukumar Mitra sub-editor of the society. Under the initiative of Kali Prasanna and Brajasundar Roy the first national university was established in Rangpur. Few days later in 'Bengal Land Holder's Association House' a committee for national university foundation was organised and Tagore was one of the distinct participants.

Although Tagore was involved in all these social activities and welfare, from the beginning he was in discord with some of the views and policies of the swadeshi leaders. Basically many of their strategies, plans and works were mere replication of the western thoughts and models and did not pay much heed to the fundamental development of education, swadeshi art and crafts, and rural reconstruction. He translated his ideas into practice in his own way, urged the villagers to set up schools, build roads, encourage cooperative and multi-crop farming. Visva Bharati University and Sriniketan were built by the idealist in Santiniketan as epitome of his concept of self-reliance and progress. Finally, after the declaration of partition the blazing fire of protest gradually lost its passion and turned into embers.

In the history of struggle for independence in India, the Partition of Bengal, Swadeshi Movement and Boycott were some of the memorable phases. Will Durant has rightly asserted that the year 1905 could be marked as the starting point of revolutionary movement in India. He considered the Partition of Bengal was India's first united and all India movement. From this struggle the people realised that it is not through mendicant politics but self-confidence and self-reliance that can help them meet their demands.

## **V. EMERGENCE OF EXTREMISTS AND TAGORE'S WITHDRAWAL FROM THE MOVEMENT**

The political atmosphere of the contemporary time had an immense impact on the movement. Indian National Congress party had bifurcated into two groups - moderates and extremists. The moderates led by Gopal Krishna Gokhale believed that political and constitutional concessions should be gained by negotiation with the government. When the failure of moderate politics became quite apparent by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a reaction set in from within the Congress circles and this new trend was referred to as the "Extremist" trend under leadership of Bipin Chandra Pal in Bengal, Bal Gangadhar Tilak in Maharashtra and Lala Lajpat Rai in Punjab. The goal of the extremists was 'swaraj'.

Tagore, an ardent worshipper of humanism could not reconcile with terrorist extremism in spite of his trenchant criticism of imperial rule. He fully respected the self-sacrificing patriotism of youths who had taken the path of extremist violence but he wanted them not to be trapped by the politics of stray violence. A champion of non-violence or Ahimsa, Tagore found it difficult to accept the insanity of the nationalists in their burning of all foreign goods as a mark of non-cooperation. He was particularly disheartened of the impassioned youths turned to the cult of bomb, expecting to liberate the motherland from the yoke of foreign tyranny by violence and terror. He unexpectedly retreated from the movement when a Bengal radical, Khudiram Bose, hurled a bomb, killing two innocent British civilians in 1908. Many of his detractors viewed this sudden withdrawal as an act of betrayal but no scathing criticism could alter his decision. However, the novelist's response to such criticism was fictionally articulated in his political novels.

## **VII. TAGORE'S CONCEPT OF NATIONALISM AND PATRIOTISM IN HIS FICTION**

Tagore in his novels *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World) and *Char Adhyay* (Four Chapters) delineates how exploitation, violence and terrorism became the ritual acts when the passionate youths sacrifice their essential human self in the name of motherland and nationalism is placed on an altar for worship. As per Raolat Report, 82% activists were between the age group 18 – 30 years. This revolutionary man power needed a well guided organised enthusiasm to germinate a constructive flow of work for the emancipation of the society, but Tagore found that it evolved as a decentralised, utterly disorganised movement.

When the novel *Ghare Baire* was almost on the verge of its completion, Bengal's terrorist movement reached its second phase. The three characters in the novel - Nikhilesh, his wife Bimala, and his friend Sandip present their personal encounter during the onslaught of the swadeshi movement. Nikhil, Tagore's alter ego, although a patriot but would not place nation above truth and conscience asserts:

I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than country. To worship my country as a God is to bring curse upon it. (116)

Tagore repudiated the deification of the country because that would naturally place it on the altar of perfection negating all the possibilities of betterment. Nikhil being a true nationalist emphasised on social reform like Tagore. On the contrary, his charismatic friend Sandip, a swadeshi leader, to whom any action in the name of the nation is right must set aside conscience. According to Sandip humanism should be burnt alive in the fire of the aimless enthusiasm of pseudo-nationalism. Sandip is basically a hypocrite, an opportunist in the guise of a leader and crafty enough to stir the younger generation. Political fire is ablazed but unfortunately the

political motivation and the purpose of national sovereignty are lost. This is the consequence of Sandip's fashion of Swadeshi movement. It became evident that the politics for nation degenerated into politics of persons and democracy expiated into autocratic policies. Leaders like Sandip deliberately propagate communalism, racism, anarchy, for their own benefits. The economically backward people are victimised by the revolutionaries. This marks the very theme and nomenclature "swadeshi" as highly ironical as the countrymen were excruciated by their own leaders who were supposed to defend them. Thus Tagore through his delineation of Sandip was actually trying to convey that this nationalist movement was often devastating and misdirecting.

Tagore was to continue denouncing revolutionary nationalism and its reliance on spectacle, violence and sloganeering in his last novel *Char Adhyay*. The novel is basically the story of a group of revolutionary terrorists in Bengal revolving around three main characters - Atin, the son of a zamindar who has joined the movement for his love for Ela. Indranath is the leader of the movement whose strategy for selecting beautiful young girls like Ela in the group works well to attract young men and incorporate them in their movement. Atin gradually realises that like Indranath he is losing his true self and humanity. Indranath is more engaged in making himself a larger than life figure, a great man as he himself says:

I'm here because it becomes me; either victory or defeat will be equally great. They (colonial rulers) tried to make me petty by closing the doors on every side. I am determined to show them that I am great, even if that entails disaster at every step. You can see... how these followers have come round me at my call, recking nothing of life and death.... Because I know how to call". (196)

Thus his leadership is a power-greed. Atin completes his degradation by killing Ela at the command of Indranath. Through this novel Tagore describes how the young men and women lose their humane self when they fall prey to violent patriotism. The four chapters of the novel not only depict the underworld of the revolutionaries but also reveal the frustration, disappointment, degradation, sacrifice of humanism which ultimately ruin their own personal life. So the vain glories of the nationalist leaders like Sandip and Indranath lead to a sense of nada instead of sparking true national sentiment and love.

Tagore's most widely acclaimed novel *Gora* also deals with the theme of nationalism and patriotism. At the beginning the central character Gora seemed to be a bigoted, xenophobic Hindu nationalist who wanted to serve India by defending its casteism, rituals and superstitions to the point of being an unthinking fundamentalist. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that Gora is unaware of the fact that he is an Irish by birth and raised in a Hindu family by Krishnadayal and Anandamoyi. But the moment he comes to know this truth, he attends true human spirit, identity and exalts the idea of internationalism. At the end of the novel Gora touches the feet of Anandamoyi and says:

You are my real mother! The mother, I sought everywhere was waiting in my own home. You have no caste, no discrimination, no contempt for anyone. You are the embodiment of goodness! It is you who is my *Bharatvarsha!* (423)

The novelist glorifies the assimilating, loving and non-discriminatory character of *Bharatvarsha* (India) whose human embodiment is Gora's mother, an epitome of humanity, love and universalism. Thus by depicting the ironical situation of a white man cultivating the unbound love for Hindu religion and nation, Tagore wants to suggest that patriotism or religion is not ingrained in the vein of a person from birth but is adopted from his surrounding and environment. This novel shows Tagore's transition from nationalism to internationalism.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Thus the Partition of Bengal is the most crucial and politically stirring event that created great controversies in the whole nation and exogenous to the rise of Swadeshi movement and Boycott. The message and slogan of swadeshi spread to various parts of the country - Rawalpindi, Kangra, Jammu and Haridwar. The nationalists like Ajit Singh, Lala Lajpat Rai, Syed Haidar Raza spread the movement in Punjab, North India, Delhi; Chidambaram Pillai took the movement to the Madras presidency. The movement was certainly on decline by 1908 as political swadeshi marked a shift from non-violence to violence, from mass mobilisation to elite action. The extremist politics also failed to crystallise into a new political organisation or make grandiose scheme of armed revolution for independence. At the first phase of the movement Tagore was drawn towards the andalan and thought that the struggle of his motherland for awakening in spiritual emancipation through unity of Mankind would find a new direction in this Anti-Partition movement. He also starkly protested the tyranny of British rule but when the extremists began to promote violence without preparing the country on constructive lines, he immediately retreated. To him the endeavour after political ambition seemed unreal to the core and pitifully feeble in their utter helplessness. He was a true patriot who not only loved his country but also examined its drawbacks, certainly necessary for future progress and prosperity and development of mankind. Thus his patriotism centred around humanity. On a concluding note it must be mentioned that Tagore believed that humanity was perfect only when the diverse races and nations had evolved their perfect distinct characteristics but all attached to the stem of humanity by the bond of love.

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