The Boycott and the Swadeshi Movement

The whole of the Bengalee speaking community was surging under degradation and the official disdain. The public opinion against the partition of the Province was flouted at the Belvedere Conference, at the hands of the Government authorities in India. A number of conferences were held at 'Belvedere' under the presidency of the Lieutenant-Governor Sir Andrew Fraser. They were organised by the Land Holders Association under Sir A. Chowdhury. But, finally, it all ended up in bureaucratic high-handedness and its flagrant disregard for the public sentiments and suggestions.

As a sequel, there was a countrywide uproar. Loud protest meetings were convened and large conferences followed on. A conference was held at Maharaja Jatindra Mohan Tagore's palace at Fathurigaeta. The Maharaja was present and took an active part in the deliberations. Among the sympathisers were present many foreign notabilities. Mr. H.E.A. Cotton had a strong sympathy with the movement for the reversal of the partition. Mr. Ratcliffe, the editor of the 'Statesman', and Mr. Fraser Blair, the editor of the 'Englishman', were also present and witnessed the resoluteness of the deliberations taken at the conference which were, in course of time, despatched to the Viceroy. This conference not only set on move

1. A Nation in Making - Surendra Nath Banerjee P.184.
different conferences on the work of active agitation, but also vitally influenced the form of the administration that was subsequently drafted by Lord Hardinge's Government. 1

The Conference at the Maharaja's palace was followed by almost daily conferences held in the Indian Association Rooms. A final conference was held at the house of Maharaja Surye Kanto Acharya of Mymensingh when it was resolved to hold a public meeting at the Town Hall on the 7th of August, 1905. It was in this meeting that the national declaration was made in the following statement:

"That this meeting fully sympathizes with the resolution adopted at many meetings held in the mofussil to abstain from the purchase of British manufactures so long as the partition Resolution is not withdrawn, as a protest against the indifference of the British public in regard to Indian affairs and the consequent disregard of Indian public opinion by the present Government."

Ambika Charan Mazumdar, was present at the sitting of this Town Hall protest meeting. To him, the partition unmistakably demonstrated two eye-opening incidents, viz, the

1. A Nation in Making - By Surendra Nath Banerjee P-165
nature of the absolute despotism of the Government and secondly, the futility of the kind of agitation the people were getting accustomed to. His insistent demand was to add practicality to all the national scheme devices. He wanted the people to keep on agitating but at the same time guard them against the pitfall of their methods of agitation. "We must agitate", said he, "but we henceforth give the agitation a practical shape". He earnestly believed that such approach would lead them to the wise following of the precept of their Vedic ancestors: 'Narmanye badhikarate' and lead them to success and practical results.

Narendra Kumar Sen, the editor of the 'Indian Mirror', was also present at the Town Hall protest meeting and delivered a short remarkable note on the Boycott policy. There underlined in it an economic principle of epoch-making significance.

Narendranath Sen tried to uphold the justness and soundness of this economic principle of Boycott which, he thought, could yield practical output only with the concerted determination of the whole people. To favour indigenous industries and discourage foreign products and manufactures, should be the maxim to make the economic theory of Boycott a real practical economic factor in the progressive development of the community. Narendra Nath Sen was well aware of the fact, that it would incur official

1. All about Partition By Prithia Ch. Roy, P-96.
2. Town Hall Protest meeting - Proceedings.
disfavour, but so strong was his feeling for the economic future underlying Boycott that he clearly asserted in the open Town Hall meeting that "Our motto in it is defence not defiance". 1

The theory of Boycott and the practice of Swadeshi developed concurrently.

The 16th of October 1905 was the day officially announced by the Government as the day on which the partition of Bengal was to take effect. That day was 30th of Aswin 1312 by the Bengalee calendar and was also proclaimed as the day of National mourning by the national agitators in collaboration with the network of village centres.

The first part of the National Day programme was dedicated to formalities and the austere ritualities like fasting and Ganges-bathing. The second half of the schedule celebrated the 'Nation Day' or 'the Rakhi Day', the day of national union.

The people strictly observed the fast and barefooted went to the Ganges-bath ceremony. The hymn of the ritual contained soaring ideology of the new patriotism. It started with a salutation to the sacred river Ganges which symbolised

1. Town Hall Protest meeting - Proceedings.
the unity of India through the chanting of the Sanskrit mantras, India’s past glory reverberated through the divided land.

They dipped into the sacred river and repeated in one united voice the prayer and the promise in the following recitation:

"Carry away with thy currents all that make for disunion, weakness, selfishness, cowardice and all that make for bondage among us to-day."  

It was observed as the day of penance and purification.

"Let the ancient vices be washed away with thy holy waters; let the ancient virtues enter into us to-day through this bath."

The ceremonial bath, the people ardently believed, would purge away all national sins and in the moment of the true feelings of purity they evoked to the spirit of nationalism to fortify them with the strength of unity and solidarity to be manifested in the patriotism of their unbreakable ties of brotherhood. From one end to the other resounded the united prayer.

"Bring unto us with thy currents, from the pure heights of the Himalayas all that make for strength and union.

and self-sacrifice for the salvation of our fallen people.

The purification ceremony was followed on by the
Hakhi-Bandhan festival. It was the revival of an ancient Indian
custom and symbolised the strong bond of unity between the
separated province and the aggrieved Bengal. The Nation-day
also marked the foundation of a Federation Hall, which remarked
Surendra Nath Banerjee, was to be the meeting ground of the
old province and its mutilated parts, the mark and symbol of
their indivisible unity. " The idea suggested itself to me
from what I saw at the Hotel-des-Invalides in Paris", reflected
Surendra Nath Banerjee in his memoir. "Where round the tomb
of Emperor Napoleon are laurelled statues, representing different
provinces. Alsace and Lorraine were at that time veiled and
shrouded. To Surendra Nath Banerjee, it seemed that there
should be a memorial like the same in Bengal to stimulate the
efforts of reunion, and the idea was appreciated by Sir Tarak
Nath Palit and sister Nivedita. Besides, the sentimental appeal—it strongly upheld the cause of Swadeshi. A national fund of
Rs. 70,000/- was opened on this day and annual sums were raised
to finance the Swadeshi enterprise.

The meeting for laying the foundation-stone of the
Federation Hall was fixed at 3:30 P.M. and about 50,000 people
hailed Bandemataram at Ananda Mohan Bose when attended by his medical advisers and carried in an invalid's chair he laid the foundation-stone. Saint Nan Singh, a Sikh priest, descendant of Guru Nanak, was among the audience and he pronounced a benediction upon the function.

A proclamation signed by Ananda Mohan Bose was read in Bengali by Rabindra Nath Tagore. It carried the following message:

"Whereas the Government has thought fit to effectuate the partition of Bengal inspite of the all round protest of the Bengalee 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 so God help us." 1

The anti-partition agitation gave rise to two parallel forces generating in Swadeshi-Boycott movement. The Swadeshi vow was its life-breath. It was inspired by Surendra Nath Banerjee and was circulated in all parts in the following words:

"Invoking God Almighty to be our witness and standing in the presence of after generations we take this solemn vow that, so far as practicable we shall use home made articles and abstain from the use of foreign articles. So help us God." 2

1. The Nation Day Proceedings
2. Ibid.
The Boycott in essence was a movement of Passive Resistance. It was a movement of the determination of the people not only to save the industries of their own by the Boycott of foreign goods; but also to create forces in the community which through passive methods would help the cause of Swadeshi. The Swadeshi movement was in spirit a protectionist Movement and only as we had not the power to make laws which was in the hands other than our own stated Surendra Nath Banerjee 'we sought to surround our domestic industries with tariff wall not raised by the mandate of the Legislature but by the determined will of our people'.

The note of seriousness of the Indians' determination affected the English market as evidenced by the remark of the paper 'Statesman' - "Lancashire had taken the recent reports from Calcutta with sufficient seriousness.

The twenty-second Indian National Congress accorded its most enthusiastic support to the Swadeshi Movement and called upon the people of the country to labour for its success by making earnest and sustained efforts to promote the growth of indigenous industries and to stimulate the consumption of indigenous articles by giving them preference over imported commodities even at some sacrifice.

"The true Swadeshi", explained Gopal Krishna Gokhale, "is both a patriotic and an economic movement. It turns the thoughts of the people to their country, accustomed them to the idea of voluntarily making some sacrifice for her sake, enables them to take an intelligent interest in her economic development for a national end."

The political domination of one country by another attracts far more attention than the more formidable though unfelt domination, which the capital enterprise and skill of one country exercise over the trade and manufacture of another. Justice Kenade on reviewing India's economic condition remarked: "Foreign insidious influence paralysed the springs of all the varied activities which together made up the life of a nation."

It was the deliberate attempt of the nationalists to Indianise every branch of the national life. It was not confined just to one side of national growth but multifarious purposes were enfolded within the national scheme of Swadeshi-Boycott movement. "Boycott is not the boycott of foreign goods only" said Bepin Chandra Pal in course of his lectures, "we have boycotted honorary offices to some extent. In East Bengal not a single popular man offered to stand for election to the new Legislative Council; and the time is coming when..."
they will boycott municipalities and District Boards also. 1

A band of inspired young men led by Satish Chandra Mukherjee declared a boycott of the Government controlled Calcutta University. 2

The Indian Universities Act passed by Lord Curzon on March 21, 1904 roused stirred popular indignation. 3

In the midst of continued and sustained student agitations the popular leader Abhutosh Chowdhury issued a manifesto on November 14 and called on a meeting on the 16th of November 1905 at the Bengal Landholders' Association for the establishment of a national council of education. 4 Jatiya Shiksha Parishad - Hemendra Prosad Ghose justified the utility and urgency of such a scheme in his article on 'The Telegraph' in which he argued the feasibility of such a proposal through combined national efforts. "And if we have decided to solve the economic question without Government help" argued the national educationists, "Can we not undertake to teach our boys without that help?" 5

The twenty-second session of the Indian National Congress passed a resolution on National Education proposal and strongly supported this national demand. 6

1. Swadeshi and Swaraj - Bepin Chandra Pal. p-240
2. At the Cross Roads - Satish Chandra Mukherjee.
3. India under Curzon and after - Lovat Fraser.
4. Calendar of the National Council of Education 1906-8
5. Amrita Bazar Patrika, October 26, 1905 p-7
6. Indian National Congress - 22nd Session - Resolution
The anti-partition agitation, thus, set release the national energy in all the fields of nation-building activities and re-inforced the programme of the Congress.

It made evident, more than anything else, the fact that public opinion was becoming a real living force in Indian life.

"The anti-partition agitation", remarked Ambika Charan Mazumder, "was a successful test of the strength of public opinion in its work of nation-building". 1

The solidarity of the public opinion was drawing considerable interest from all circles. 'The Statesman' in its editorial note reflected back on the folly of the Government in its act of the partition.

"There is, we are afraid, no escape, from the conclusion that the Government is paying the penalty of its complete failure to understand the feeling of the people in regard to the integrity of the Province. Lord Curzon, most unfortunately has acted consistently upon his conviction that there is properly speaking no public opinion in India". 2

In the concluding remark 'The Statesman' earnestly

2. The Statesman, October 13, 1905.
urged to the officials ' to arrive at a proper estimate of
the public feelings and of the forces which have come into
play since the announcement of partition'.