

The *Swadeshi* Movement in Contai: Zamindars and Women

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The *Swadeshi* Movement of Contai constituted an integral part of the all-Bengal *Swadeshi* Movement. But the issues, dimensions and dynamics of the movement hold altogether a new picture, and make it clear that the Contai movement in spite of having the all-Bengal characteristics was always to a very great extent Local.

On December 12, 1903 the partition of Bengal scheme in its embryonic form came to be publicly known. Bengal burst into protest against this grievous wrong. Hence all cities and towns and market places assumed a new appearance and a new fervour with the strong determination to resist the implementation of the partition scheme. Protest meetings and protest processions became a regular feature. Newspapers disgorged the wounded feelings of the people. *Nihar*, severely criticized Curzon's divisive scheme without thinking of any ire that might come upon it. It writes, "As Curzon *Bahadur* has decided to partition Bengal however ludicrous be the scheme, so it will surely be effected. But it is a pity that the Viceroy must have it known that the partition scheme will bring about unnecessary changes, and it will unnecessarily disturb the easy and peaceful life of the Bengalis".¹

It is evident from the *Nihar* that Contai was all along aware of the fact that if any partition would occur she would be affected more badly than any other region of Bengal.² Besides she had the great fear that as a result of any partition her geography would be circumscribed, her economy would be crippled much more than it had been during the early years of the colonial rule owing to the destruction of her salt-manufacturing industry and other cottage industries, and her socio-cultural life would be impoverished owing to her arbitrary joining with the culturally impoverished Orissa. That is why thinking of this agony of the Contai people the *Nihar* writes, "The government thinks that India is the play ground of the British national ideas and activities, and it is the amphitheatre for the exercise of the prowess of the ruler, and that the subject-people should only have the fear of the ruling power, and they can have no sense of liberty".³ In this context the *Nihar* delineating the worst bureaucratic features of the government which recklessly disregards the cherished feelings of the people, challenges, "Does the government feel itself so supreme as to make and unmake the land and the people according to its own whims and vagaries".⁴ In this connection it is worth noting that nine days before the partition Rabindranath similarly challenged the ruler: "Are you so strong enough to sunder what fate has bound together, do you really think that our lives are yours to make and break"?⁵

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The partition took effect on October 16, 1905. Mother Bengal was now cut up into two halves. All Bengal shivered in an indescribable agony, pain and sorrow. So the day was observed as the day of national mourning. To all Bengal October 16 was a day of solemn mourning. So the day was observed with two special ceremonies: one was *Arandhan* and the other was *Rakhibandhan*. *Arandhan* signified the depth and gravity of the sorrow of the Bengalis, and *Rakhibandhan* asserted the fraternal solidarity and the unity of the Bengalis. Besides these two ceremonies there were protest processions with *samkritan* parties which sang mournful *kritans* and patriotic songs. In the *Harikatha* and *Kathakatha* sittings there were allegorically stressed what great wrong the government had done to the people. On the day there was organized a vast meeting in Contai town. One local zamindar Sjt. Bipinbihari Sasmal presided over the meeting. He emphatically pointed out that all their humble prayers and petitions to the government for not partitioning Bengal were brushed aside, so they must have to take resort to other means.⁶

Now in place of the moderate, and so long ineffective, techniques of prayers and petitions traditionally qualified with *Vaishnava* modesty and humility there came new techniques tempered with Tantric ideology. By this time the anti-partition agitation was merged into the Boycott and the *Swadeshi* movement. So in almost all the meetings that followed the speakers eloquently explained the meaning and significance of 'boycott' and '*swadeshi*'. According to their interpretations boycott was not merely the abandonment of Briton- goods it was the idea of non-co-operation with the British in every field. In a deeper sense it was an act of self-defence, an act of aggression for the sake of self-preservation. And '*swadeshi*' which literally means a sincere and wholehearted love and attachment to anything and everything of mother Bengal (and also of India) now implicitly referred to the newly awakened nationalism of the Bengalis ultimately aiming at political regeneration leading India towards '*Swaraj*'.

In Contai the zamindars played a significant role in the anti-partition movement. In most cases they themselves took the leading in championing boycott and *swadeshi*. They engaged their *naibs*, *gomostas* and other *amlas* to speak to their tenants in favour of boycott and *swadeshi*.⁷ It was so heard that in one case or two the zamindars by the beating of drums in their estates forbade the shop-keepers to import and sell British goods, and they also forbade the buyers to purchase any such goods.⁸ It is learnt from *Nihar* and *Medini Bandhaba*, the two local weeklys that in the families of the zamindars and also in those of their relations the use of British goods particularly salt and sugar was totally stopped, and that their deities in temples were served sugar-less oblations.⁹

The zamindars of Contai from the very first stage of the anti-partition agitation did their best by all means to put pressure on the government for the withdrawal of the Partition. They conducted the agitation with reckless hostility towards the cruel design of the government, and they tried with every sincerity of purpose to extend and foster the boycott and *swadeshi*. They held regularly protest meetings at their houses, in the *chandimandaps* and in open market places to explain the dire need of protesting against the Partition. The participation of the zamindars in the protest processions and picketings gave an effective impetus to the movement. The personal presence of the zamindars in the processions and picketings and their inflammatory speeches delivered in the meetings

attracted the common mass to the movement and inspired them to keep their religion deprofaned, to fight against the government design to weaken Bengal and the Bengalees and above all to strengthen Bengali nationalism.¹⁰ By virtue of the repeated shoutings of *Bande Mataram*, the singing of patriotic songs and the *samkirtan* in chorus the *Swadeshi* movement in Contai assumed an air of romance and was transformed into a sort of religious festivity.¹¹ As a result of all these all the processionists and picketers along with the leading zamindars were so engrossed in the *Swadeshi* frenzy that they entered into the shops selling Briton cloths and other British goods and destroyed all their articles. It is worthwhile to note that on one market day the processionists led by zamindar Digambar Nanda of Mugberia threw away all the Liverpool salt packets in the Itaberia canal; they also set fire on the British cloths, destroyed sugar and other British goods and glass bangles (*reshmi churi*).¹² The Itaberia incident inflamed the *swadeshi* fire in Contai. All the *thanas* of the Contai subdivision adroitly took the Itaberia model as the proper method of boycottism. To the people *Swadeshi-ism* now became their only one idea, nay the only one weapon of salvation.

The heroic leading of Digambar Nanda at Itaberia fanned the flames of boycott, and incited all the zamindars of Contai to come to the forefront of the movement. Henceforth they engaged their *amlas* to spread the boycott idea among the tenants; they prohibited the shop-keepers to sell British salt and sugar. They asked the students to extend the agitation to villages and to explain to villagers the boycott ideal and to follow the boycott activities whole heartedly as all these would do good for the country and the countrymen. The priests of the zamindari estates came forward to foster the boycotting; and working on the religious scruples by emphasizing the profanities of salt and sugar they carried the boycott into every household.¹³ The zamindars also engaged the *Harisabha*, *Dharmasabha* and *Samkritan* parties to heighten the tone of the boycott-*swadeshi* movement.¹⁴ It was thus the Contai movement attained the character of a religious reform movement. In this connection it is striking to note that in a meeting held in the house of one Sital Prasad Mandal of Chandibheti near Contai some thirty to forty *Harisabha* parties graced the assemblage with an aroma of religiosity. It is evident from the *Nihar* that *Harisabha* and *Samkritan* parties were regarded as one cardinal feature of the meetings organised in the *swadeshi* days.¹⁵ From this one may surmise the heightened the character of religious nationalism of Contai.

To foster boycott and *swadeshi* the zamindars organised *melas* in their estates. The religion-centric *melas* like *Rasmela*, *Dolmela*, *Siva-chaturdashi mela* and *Charakmela* were by virtue of their organisation transformed into *swadeshi melas*. Students and volunteers paraded up and down the *melas*. They sang *swadeshi* songs and lectured on the impurities of the British sugar and salt. In the *melas* stalls of *swadeshi* goods were opened. In most cases *swadeshi melas* became centres of the exhibition of ingenious *swadeshi* goods which drew the attention of the people and attracted them to the dexterity in their production. This is how the *melas* in one sense upheld the significance of the *swadeshi*.¹⁶

The students and their teachers of the High English and Middle English Schools were the life-force of the *swadeshi* movement of Contai. Practically this was so as they added a new connotation to nationalism. To them nationalism was now not merely

religion, faith and creed. It was solely *matri-puja*, worship of the motherland Bengal. In this *puja* their mantra was *Bandemataram*. Now it became the gospel of their new nationalism, and as mother-worshippers they were crusaders. *Bademataram* was their war-cry. The running boycott and *swadeshi* movement was the crusade in which they would be laurelled with victory. They had the firm conviction that they would surely win, and that the government would surely have to reunite Bengal if they would persist in the movement.¹⁷

The students threw themselves heart and soul into the movement caring little for what punishment might come upon them. They had the only one motto that they would make the boycott general and extend it as wide as possible. So they took it as their bounden duty to participate in protest processions and picketing at shops selling Briton-cloths and other British goods, and to organize protest meetings and participate in them.¹⁸ It was found in most cases their picketings bore the desired results, but in certain cases where the shop-keepers did not pay any heed to their protests against the selling of imported cloths, they forcibly entered into the shops and took out all the cloths and set them to fire.¹⁹ This led to police cases and to their flogging and other repressions including imprisonment. In such cases the students sang out: "They have no longer any fear even a little of the red-capped and black-uniformed police. They will all along remain dedicated to adoring the mother land even if the brute force sends them to prison".²⁰ The students were then the leaders in their own right. They organized street meetings in markets on market-days. In the meetings they mostly read aloud leaflets like *Raja ke, Sonar Bangla, Mukti Kon Pathe*, and then explained how the alien ruler had ruined golden Bengal by looting her riches and destroying her industries. They also held before them from the Calcutta-published news papers how the movement was extending and progressing all over the country.²¹

In the *Swadeshi* movement the women of Contai played a significant role of some great historical significance. It is historic in the sense that like Rani Krishnapriya of the Tamluk Raj Estate (1781) and Rani Siromani of Karnagarh of the Chuar days (1794) who heroically raised their heads against the colonial arbitrary rule and economic exactions Rani Haripriya of Garh Basudebpur made a direct protest against the colonial cruel design of partitioning Bengal for weakening Bengal and Bengali nationalism.²² Raniji decided to protest against this grievous wrong; so she unhesitatingly made a direct participation in the running boycott-*swadeshi* movement in which big zamindars of Contai like Digambar Nanda and others had already taken a leading part. In a meeting held in her Estate Raniji spoke to her tenants that Bengal was now in a great crisis. Her society, economy, culture, religion and above all her nationality were now on the verge of ruin. Now it was the duty of all her sons and daughters to stand by her in this her crisis, and to undo the wrong they must have to put pressure on the government by using every possible means. Raniji felt that the boycott and *swadeshi* would be the effective weapons to achieve their desired end i.e. to make the government rescind the Partition orders. She asked her people not to use Briton cloth sugar and salt. Raniji along with all her relations set fire to their valuable *bilati* cloths and smashed all their dear *reshmi* bangles.²³ All these gave imparted a great impetus to the women of her Estate and also to the women of Contai. For these her heroic activities the people of her Estate and also of Contai hailed her as the Rani Siromoni of Garh Basudebpur. Particularly in those days Raniji became a

true role model to women-fighters of all Bengal. And that is why participation of the Contai women in the boycott-*swadesh* movement became a unique episode in the history of Midnapore. Again it is unique in the sense that it was the breeding-ground that gave birth to the heroines of *Lavan* Satyagraha of 1930.

The sacerdotal class i.e. the *purohits*, *goswamis* and pundits played a lot in fostering the boycott movement. The pundits of Contai-*tols* following the dictates of the Nawadwip and Bhatpara pundits condemned the use of sugar and salt in worshipping gods and offering oblations to the forefathers as these two articles were clarified with the blood and bones of cows and pigs, and therefore these two articles would grievously impair Hindu religion. All the family priests took up the matter readily and carried the boycott into every household of their *Yajmans*.²⁴

In fostering boycott and *swadeshi Hari- Katha and Kathakata* sittings played a very significant role. To the Contai people the *Kathak- thakur's Ravana, Duryodhana and Kamsa* and their inhuman and cruel wrong-doings seemed to be the true personifications of the demoniac actions of the alien rulers. All these deeply impressed the emotionally fevered Contai people, so in every evening they thronged to these sittings.²⁵

By the middle of 1907 it became perceptibly clear that the anti-partition movement was gradually declining and by the middle of 1908 it was clear that the boycott programme could not achieve the desired end. The leaders of the agitation were now trying hard to keep the movement alive. But they could not stir up the former enthusiasm of the people. It was found that by this time the zamindars had got dispirited. The pressure of the government circulars drew the students to schools. Practically this time they had lost their fighting zeal and nationalist enthusiasm. The cry of *Bande Mataram* was almost stopped. The agricultural class now questioned what benefit was there in boycotting British goods as the *bilati* goods were much cheaper than country-made goods particularly cotton-cloths. Besides, it became clear to all that there was no possibility of a united Bengal. Contai as well as Bengal was now getting totally changed. The Contai of 1905 and 1906 was now almost a dream. Now all over the country their prevailed an amazing silence. In Aurobindo's words ---- "A hush had fallen on the country". Yet the leading agitators of Contai hoped against the hope that though the first upsurge of the movement was gone, the nationalist sentiment of the Contai people did not disappear. True, the stream of *swadeshi* had lost its life-force in the desert of failure and frustration; at the same time it was also true that the stream would again flow with all vehemence and forcefulness in proper times. Practically and historically this became a reality during the enthusiastic and heroic participation of the Contai people in the Non-co-operation Movement of 1920-21, in the historic *Lavan* Satyagraha of 1930 and also in the Quit India Movement (1942).

References:

- (1) *Nihar*, July 5, 1904, V-3, N-45.
- (2) *Ibid*, December 22, 1903, V-3, N-17.
- (3) *Ibid*.

- (4) *Ibid*, July 5, 1904, V-3, N-45.
- (5) Rabindra Nath Tagore, *Gitabitan* on 21 *Aswin* 1312 (Oct.7, 1905), *Visva-Bharati*, 1358 *B.S.*, p.266.
- (6) *Nihar*, October 24, 1905, V-5, N-9.
- (7) *Ibid*, September 12, 1905, V-5, N-5 & October 24, 1905, V-5, N-9.
- (8) *Ibid*, October 24, 1905, V-5, N-9.
- (9) *Ibid*, September 12, 1905, V-5, N-5 & October 24, 1905, V-5, N-9 & June 5, 1906, V-5, N-41.
- (10) *Ibid*, October 24, 1905, V-5, N-9 & March 20, 1906, V-5, N-30 & June 5, 1906, V-5, N-41.
- (11) *Ibid*, October 24, 1905, V-5, N-9 & Basanta Kumar Das, *Swadhinata Sangrame Medinipur*, Vol.-I, *Medinipur Swadhinata Sangram Itihas Samiti*, Kolkata, 1980, p.94.
- (12) *Ibid*, Vol.-I, p.116.
- (13) *Nihar*, October 3, 1905, V-5, N-8.
- (14) *Ibid*, October 24, 1905, V-5, N-9.
- (15) *Ibid*, May 29, 1906, V-5, N-40.
- (16) *Ibid*, October 29, 1907, V-7, N-9.
- (17) *Ibid*, March 20, 1906, V-5, N-30.
- (18) *Ibid*, October 24, 1905, V-5, N-9 & November 7, 1905, V-5, N-4 & December 12, 1905, V-5, N-16.
- (19) *Ibid*, October 9, 1906, V-6, N-6 & October 30, 1906, V-6, N-9.
- (20) Basanta Kumar Das, *Swadhinata Sangrame Medinipur*, Vol.-I, *Medinipur Swadhinata Sangram Itihas Samiti*, Kolkata, 1980, p.110.
- (21) *Nihar*, December 12, 1905, V-5, N-16.
- (22) *Ibid*, October 24, 1905, V-5, N-9.
- (23) *Ibid*.
- (24) *Ibid*, October 24, 1905, V-5, N-9 & June 5, 1906, V-5, N-41 & October 9, 1906, V-6, N-7.
- (25) *Ibid*, October 24, 1905, V-5, N-9 & June 5, 1906, V-5, N-41.