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# UNIT 11 PARTITION OF BENGAL AND THE SWADESHI MOVEMENT

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## 11.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit attempts to place before you the factors which prompted the British to partition Bengal in 1905. It also gives an account of the intense nationalist reaction the move evoked and spells out the changes Swadeshi movement brought about in the content and forms of the Indian struggle for freedom. After reading this unit you will be able to:

- explain the background in which the Indian nationalists and the British authorities confronted each other,
- identify the motives behind the scheme for partitioning Bengal,
- discuss how the Swadeshi movement grew, and what political trends and techniques it developed,
- appreciate the strength of the movement, as well as the difficulties it encountered, and finally,
- make an over-all assessment of the historic phenomenon.

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## 11.1 INTRODUCTION

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The enthusiasm of the articulate representatives of the educated middle class—the newly acclaimed leaders of Indian Society—appears to have considerably diminished by the close of the 19th century.

Personalities like Gladstone in Britain and Lord Ripon in India, who realised the importance of the educated Indians and sympathised with their aspirations, were no longer at the helm of affairs. Instead, men who distrusted them without exception, and who disliked any relaxation of Britain's imperialist hold over India, were in charge of the governance of India. The authorities tended to ignore the Indian opinions and turned a blind eye to acts of racial arrogance by the officials. They even tried to undermine those nominal concessions which had grudgingly been conceded to Indians from time to time in the earlier period. The hostility of the Raj was becoming apparent even to the earlier nationalists. Many of them had realised by 1900 the futility of their petitioning and praying to the Government. Their very modest demands for jobs in the Indian Civil Service and some reforms in the Legislative Councils had practically been disregarded. Their appeal for a just British rule in India in place of the prevailing "un-British" misrule fell on deaf ears. Their demands for constitutional concessions that had repeatedly been made from the Indian National Congress platform for about two decades produced only the paltry reforms of 1892. The situation was

considerably worsened in the early years of the 20th century due to the presence in India of a Viceroy like Lord Curzon, who wanted to treat the Congress as an "unclean thing", reject all its leaders' pleas with "frigid indifference" and consider the Civil Service as one "specifically reserved for Europeans". Like all staunch imperialists, Curzon was an unqualified racist, proclaiming that "the highest ideal of truth is to a large extent a Western concept" and speaking of Indians in his benevolent moods in tones "one normally reserves for pet animals". (S. Gopal, *British Policy in India, 1858-1905*, Cambridge, 1965, p. 227). Alarmed and ruffled by the Curzonian presence as the earlier nationalists were, they were not so dispirited as to swallow every humiliation or to lie ignominiously low. They had grown in stature in the eyes of their own people, learnt from their social reformers and ideologue to have faith in themselves and acquired sufficient amount of self-respect to ask for civilized treatment and natural justice. A confrontation between Curzon and the educated middle class nationalists, therefore, was bound to take place. It eventually did in Bengal—where the Indian intelligentsia was most assertive and where Curzon was at his offensive worst.

Curzon was the first to start his attack in Bengal. As early as 1899 he reduced the number of elected members in the Calcutta Corporation. This measure was intended primarily to satisfy the European business interests in the city, who often complained of delays in the grant of licences and similar other facilities. The consideration behind the action was obvious, and its undemocratic nature was un-mistakable. The Calcutta citizens felt deeply offended and wronged. However, before they could digest this wrong, Curzon launched an assault on the autonomous character of Calcutta University — the pride of the educated sections in Bengal. Armed with the recommendations of Indian Universities Commission, whose sole Indian member (Gurudas Banerji) disagreed wholly with others, Curzon passed the Universities Act (1904). The objective used as a pretext was "to raise the standard of education all round". The act cut down the number of elected senate members (mostly Indians) and transferred the ultimate power of affiliating colleges and schools, as well as giving them grants-in-aid, to the Government officials. This piece of legislation left the outraged members of the educated middle class in no doubt about the Viceroy's determination to hurt them and break their spirit in every conceivable way. They naturally had to prepare themselves mentally for the worst, and think in terms of offering resistance. The worst, as it turned out, came rather quickly and dramatically in July 1905 when Curzon announced the partition of Bengal.

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## 11.2 THE PLAN FOR THE PARTITION OF BENGAL

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The province of Bengal under a Lieutenant Governor was an unwieldy territory of diverse population, using various languages and dialects and differing widely in terms of economic development. Apart from Bengal proper (i.e. Bengali-speaking western and eastern Bengal), it originally comprised the whole of Bihar, Orissa and Assam. Earlier, too, the British authorities did occasionally think of reducing the size of the province for administrative convenience. In 1874 they actually separated Assam from Bengal by making it a Chief Commissioner's province, and adding to it, despite some local opposition, the predominantly Bengali-speaking area of Sylhet. Assam was further extended in 1897 by the transfer for the time being of South Lushai hill tracts from Bengal. Such piece-meal reductions, however, had not conclusively solved the British difficulty in managing a province of the proportion of Bengal with all its attendant problems. From the administrative point of view, as well as from the angle of equal developmental opportunities for all the areas, some sort of territorial reorganisation of the province of Bengal was therefore needed. Curzon did not appear to be thinking unreasonably when he talked of 'readjustments' of Bengal early in 1904. If he had ever thought of streamlining the province by disassociating the linguistically divergent, Orissa and Bihar from it, as it was so aptly and repeatedly advocated by the nationalists themselves, Curzon's policy would probably have been hailed as a principled and far-sighted one. Instead, he and his main advisors—Sir A. Fraser, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, and H.H. Risley, Secretary, Home Department, Government of India—were determined to use the plea for territorial readjustment to throttle the voice of nationalism. The move was calculated to hurt chiefly those who spearheaded the national movement in the eastern part of India, namely, the Bengali-speaking educated middle class. Having been the first to be brought under the British rule, the Bengalis were among the pioneers in taking to English education, imbibing Western Liberal ideas and airing nationalistic and patriotic views. This annoyed the imperialist authorities and they decided to take action.

## 11.3 THE MOTIVE BEHIND THE PLAN

In the eyes of Curzon and others like him Bengal was the most vulnerable point in the entire British Indian empire. In their view the Bengalis were “a force already formidable, and certain to be a source of increasing trouble in the future”. To meet the growing nationalist challenge in eastern India Curzon and his advisors searched for an effective answers, and eventually found it in the division of the Bengali-speaking people. The official assessment was: “Bengal united is a power, Bengal divided will pull in several different ways”. Curzon and Company were determined “to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents” to the British rule. The splitting up operations, or the arrangement for giving effect to the maxim “divide and rule”, had to be done in such a manner as to make the Bengalis suffer physical as well as mental division. This Curzon wanted to achieve by creating a situation of mutual suspicion and jealousy between the two major communities in Bengal — the Hindus and the Muslims.

Curzon and his advisors knew that their opponents in Bengal came largely from among the Hindus, who had benefited more than their Muslim brethren by taking socio-economic and educational advantage of the British rule. Majority of the Muslims being agriculturists could not manage to take a similar advantage. By shrewdly suggesting that his Government wished to stand by the Muslims in their race for advancement with the Hindus, and secure them from any threat of Hindu domination, Curzon planned to take away from Bengal those territories where Muslims were more numerous, and join these with Assam to form a new province with Dacca as its Capital. The new province, Curzon hoped, “would invest the Mohammedans in Eastern Bengal with a unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of the old Mussalman viceroys and kings”. He also expected Dacca “to acquire the special character of a Provincial Capital where Mohammedan interest would be strongly represented if not predominant”. By partitioning Bengal, therefore, Curzon and his lieutenants wanted to set up Dacca as a parallel political centre to the nationalistically oriented Calcutta. To make use, of the Muslims to counter-balance the Hindus they intended to create out of Bengal a Muslim-majority province (where 15 million Muslims would live with 12 million Hindus and reduce the Bengali speaking people into a minority in what would remain as Bengal (where 19 million Bengali speaking persons should be outnumbered by 35 million speakers of Hindi, Oriya and other languages). This mischievous game was being played, above all, to cripple the educated Indian middle class nationalists.

## 11.4 THE PARTITION

The Curzonian scheme to partition Bengal took a concrete shape gradually from the time the Viceroy wrote his minute on Territorial Redistribution on 1 June, 1903 to the day the final scheme of division was despatched to the home authorities in London for sanction on 2 February, 1905. On 19 July, 1905 the Government of India announced its decision to form the new province of “Eastern Bengal and Assam”, comprising the Chittagong, Dacca and Rajshahi divisions, Hill Tippera (Tripura), Malda and Assam. The province came into existence on 16 October, 1905, by breaking up Bengal and its 41.5 million Bengali speaking people.

### Check Your Progress 1

1 Which of the following statements are correct (✓) or wrong (×)

When Bengal was being partitioned

- i) Lord Curzon was the Viceroy of India.
- ii) Sir A. Fraser was the Secretary, Home Department, Government of India.
- iii) H.H. Risley was the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal.
- iv) Bihar and Orissa were separate provinces.

2 What was the Curzon’s real motive in partitioning Bengal? Answer in about 10 lines.

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## 11.5 THE MISCALCULATION OF THE GOVERNMENT

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Even while dividing Bengal most impudently, and with contempt for the Bengalis, Curzon and his men made their own calculations about the kind of resistance, they may have to face. They knew about the worries of the babus in eastern Bengal over the prospect of clerical jobs. They were also aware of the difficulty the Bengali Zamindars (having estates in both eastern and western parts) had to face over the increased expenses for engaging two sets of agents and pleaders. The Calcutta High Court lawyers', they knew, will feel concerned over the loss of practice because of a separate High Court in the new province. They would think of the anxieties of the jute and rice trading interests near the port of Calcutta over the challenge that Chittagong might pose as an alternative outlet. They also knew how Calcutta nationalists might feel disturbed on account of the loss of a considerable portion of their audience and following. But they expected all worries to subside in course of time, or at the most, to lead for a while only to protest meetings and processions that could easily be tolerated and ignored.

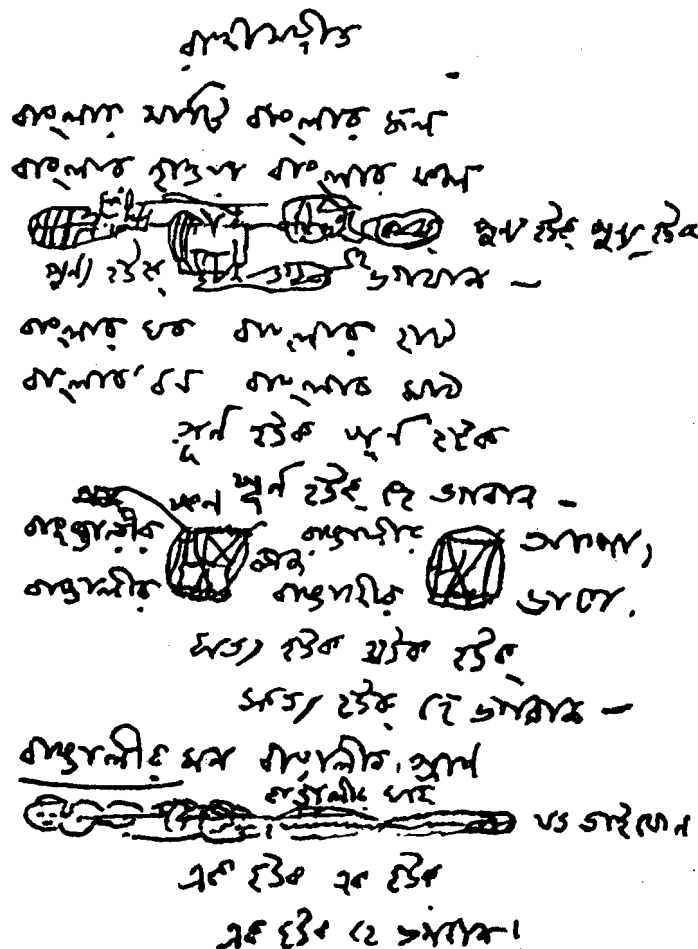
The Government had no idea whatsoever of the stormy political movement which the Partition would cause, breaking it away from traditional ways of respectful resentment, generating unprecedented militancy and turning it rapidly into a battle for *swaraj* (self-rule). The authorities grossly underestimated the Bengali dislike for authoritarianism which had been produced among them by their long history of virtual independence from nominal central powers. They also failed to grasp the Bengali feeling for unity and pride in their attainments, at least among the literates which had been fostered by intense educational, intellectual and cultural activities during the whole of the 19th century. Apart from its being the centre of economic and political affairs, the metropolis of Calcutta—the capital of British India—had already become the nerve-centre of Bengali consciousness. It drew students from all parts of Bengal, sent out teachers, professionals (engineers and doctors) and petty officials to every nook and corner of the province, often far beyond it. Calcutta had made a significant contribution to the growth of a powerful literary language. The city had an increasing number of high-level newspapers and periodicals as well as a band of writers who were producing developed modern literature.

With their gravitational point in Calcutta, the educated Bengalis were at the beginning of the 20th century inspiring large parts of the country by their achievements in literature (led by Rabindranath Tagore), in science (led by Jagadish Chandra Bose and Prafulla Chandra Roy) in politics (led by Surendranath Banerjee and the up-coming Bepinchandra Pal and Aurobindo Ghosh) and in religion (typified by Swami Vivekananda). Almost at the same time they were making careful note of the chinks that the Boer war had revealed in the so-called impenetrable British armour. They also felt greatly elated and assured when much under-rated Oriental Japan defeated in 1904-05 the over-rated Occidental Czarist Russia. Their rising self-confidence was matched by the growing abhorrence with which they looked down upon all acts of racial intimidation and discrimination.

The educated middle class Indians in Bengal, like their counter parts in the rest of the country, were severely critical of the "drain of wealth" from India to Britain, and of the ravages which India suffered on account of frequent recurrence of famines and plague. They themselves were hard-hit economically, partly because of over-crowding in the professions, and partly due to the unremunerative fragmentation through inheritance of their landed properties. To make matters worse, there was a sudden rise in the prices of all commodities that affected everybody, including the members of the middle class, the rise being "steepest between 1905 and 1908—precisely the years of maximum political unrest". (Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947, Delhi, 1983 p.109*). In sum, one could say that Bengal and the Bengali middle class in 1905 were by no means in a mood to surrender to the Curzonian assault. But Curzon himself did not seem to be adequately aware of it.

## 11.6 BOYCOTT, SWADESHI AND NATIONAL EDUCATION

The anti-partition agitation began in Bengal on the conventional moderate nationalist lines, though with a great deal of noise and angry protestations. There were sharp press campaigns against the partition scheme, numerous public meetings in opposition to it and the drafting of petitions to the Government for its annulment. Big conferences were held at the Town Hall, Calcutta, where delegates from districts came to participate and gave vent to their injured sentiments. All this was impressive, making the educated middle class's case against the partition loud and clear. But it made no effect on the indifference of the authorities in India and Britain. The evident failure of these methods, therefore, led to a search for new techniques from the middle of 1905 and resulted in the discovery of the boycott of British goods as an effective weapon. The boycott suggestion first came from Krishnakumar Mitra's *Sanjivani* on 3 July, 1905, and was later accepted by the prominent publicmen at the Town Hall meeting of 7 August, 1905. The discovery was followed by the calls of Rabindranath Tagore and Ramendra Sunder Trivedi, respectively, for the observance of *raksha-bandhan* (the tying of thread wristlets on each other's hands as a symbol of brotherhood) and *arandhan* (the keeping of the hearth unlit at all the homes as a sign of mourning) on the day the partition was put into effect. With these measures the movement gained a new fervour.



11. Rakhi Sangeet

The boycott of British products was followed by

- the advocacy of *swadeshi* or exhorting purchasers to buy indigenously produced goods as a patriotic duty,
- *Charkha* (the spinning wheel) came to typify the popular concern for the country's economic self-sufficiency, and
- the holding of *swadeshi melas* or fairs for selling handicrafts and other articles became a regular feature.

A considerable enthusiasm was created for undertaking *swadeshi* or Indian enterprises. A number of exclusively Indian industrial ventures, such as the Calcutta Potteries, Bengal

Chemicals, Bange Lakshmi Cotton Mills, Mohini Mills and National Tannery were started. Various soap, match box and tobacco manufacturing establishments and oil mills, as well as financial activities, like the *swadeshi* banks, insurance and steam navigation companies also took off the ground under the impetus generated by the movement.

Meanwhile, the picketing before the shops selling British goods soon led to a boycott of the officially controlled educational institutions. The British threat to the student-pickers in the form of the withdrawal of grants, scholarships and affiliations of the institutions to which they belonged (through the infamous circular of 22 October, 1905 issued by Carlyle, the Chief Secretary of the Government of Bengal, known otherwise as the "Carlyle Circular") and the actual imposition of fines and rustication orders on them resulted in the decision by large number of students to leave these schools and colleges of "slavery". Boycott of schools and colleges forced the leaders of the *Swadeshi* movement to think in terms of running a parallel system of education in Bengal. Soon appeals were made, donations collected and distinguished persons came forward to formulate programmes for national education. These efforts resulted in the establishment of the Bengal Technical Institute (which was started on 25 July, 1906, and which later turned into the College of Engineering and Technology, Jadavpur—the nucleus of the present day Jadavpur University), the Bengal National College and School (which was set up on 15 August, 1906 with Aurobindo Ghosh as its Principal) and a number of national, primary and secondary schools in the districts.

## 11.7 THE SAMITIS AND THE POLITICAL TRENDS

For aiding the cause of national education, and for spreading the messages of boycott and *swadeshi*, a large number of national volunteer bodies or *samitis* sprang up in Calcutta and the districts. Some of the distinguished among them were the Dawn Society (named after the famous journal of the time—Dawn), the Anti-Circular Society (formed initially to protest against the "Carlyle Circular"), the *Swadeshbandhav*, the *Brati*, the *Anushilan*, the *Suhrid* and the *Sadhena samitis*. These *samitis* preached the essentials of *swadeshi* and boycott, took up social work during famines and epidemics, imparted physical and moral training, organised crafts and national schools and set up arbitration committees and village societies. They encouraged folk singers and artistes (notably persons like Mukunda Das, Bhusan Das and Mufizuddin Bayati) to perform on the *swadeshi* themes in local dialects. These efforts served to, supplement at the rural level the spate of patriotic compositions by literary stalwarts like Rabindranath Tagore, Rajanikanta Sen, Dwijendralal Roy, Girindramohini Dasi, Sayed Abu Mohammed, or playwrights like Girishchandra Ghosh, Kshirodeprasad Vidyavinode and Amritalal Bose. The ideologies of *samitis* ranged from secularism to religious revivalism, from moderate politics to social reformism (through constructive economic, educational and social programmes), and included within their range political extremism.

As a matter of fact several trends of political thinking were competing with one another for popular acceptance during the *swadeshi* days in Bengal:

- i) The moderate nationalist opinion (which was represented by persons like Surendranath Banerjea, Krishnakumar Mitra and Narendra Kumar Sen) still had abiding faithing in the British sense of justice, and were not in favour of stretching the agitation too far. Its advocates actually pinned their hopes on the Liberal Morley's appointment as Secretary of State for India in Britain. Their lukewarmness was so obviously out of tune with the prevailing militant mood against the British authorities that the moderates rapidly and conclusively lost their popularity.
- ii) The second or the social reformist creed of "constructive *swadeshi*"— as it was termed— aimed at gathering national strength through a persistent movement of self-help and self-reliance (or *Atmashakti* according to Rabindranath Tagore) by organising indigenous enterprises, nationalistic educational processes and setting up village uplift societies to bridge the gulf between the rural and urban people.

All those who did not see eye to eye with the moderate nationalists supported the cause of "constructive *swadeshi*" in the beginning. Satishchandra Mukherji, Aswini Kumar Dutta, Rabindranath Tagore, Prafulla Chandra Roy and Nilratan Sircar were its prime adherents.

- iii) Even though the programme recommended by the social reformists was significant in some ways, it was too arduous, unostentatious and unexciting to have wide appeal in these heady days. It could neither match the exuberance of political leaders like

Bepinchandra Pal, Aurobindo Ghosh and Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya, nor satisfy the impatient, adventurous youth of Bengal. In such circumstances, the appearance of political extremism—the third trend—was natural. It found expression in periodicals like *New India* (edited by Bepinchandra Pal), *Bande Mataram* (edited by Aurobindo Ghosh), *Sandhya* (edited by Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya) and *Yugantar* (edited by Bhupendranath Dutta). The political extremists demanded self-government for India, not under British tutelage or British Paramountcy (as the moderates wished), but by severing all British connections, and wiping off all British influences.

The extremist political leaders gave a clarion call for the establishment of *swaraj* and attempted to find the ways and means for achieving it. They speedily came to the conclusion that the techniques of boycott should be escalated from British goods and educational institutions to other spheres, such as the British administration, the British courts of law and the British services, shaking the foundation of British authority in India. Bepinchandra Pal discribed such escalation as “passive resistance” or refusal “to render any voluntary or honorary service to the Government”. Aurobindo Ghosh improved upon the strategy further in a series of articles in *Bande Mataram* in April 1907, and came out with the theory of “organised and relentless boycott” of British goods, British system of education, judiciary and executive, and the social boycott of the loyalists and civil disobedience of unjust laws.

If British repressions surpassed the limits of Indian endurance, Aurobindo Ghosh was prepared to embark upon an anti-British armed struggle. How could British rule in India continue, Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya asked, if the *chowkidar*, the constable, the deputy, the munisiff and the clerk, not to speak of the sepoy, resigned their respective functions.

The fervour with which the exponents of political extremism brought the issues of *swaraj* and its attainment through passive resistance to the fore, relegated all other points to the back-ground, including the very question that occasioned the agitation the partition of Bengal. In comparison with the importance of the struggle for *swaraj*, the unification of Bengal seemed only a secondary issue—“the pettiest and narrowest of all political objects” (Aurobindo Ghosh’s article in *Bande Mataram*, 28 April, 1907) Such nationalisation of a regional issue, and the clarification of the national goal accompanying it, marked the most extraordinary advancement that Indian nationalists were able to make within a brief animated span of merely two years.

**Check Your Progress 2**

1 Match the following periodicals with the names of their editors.

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|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| i) <i>Bande Mataram</i> | a) Bepin Chandra Pal       |
| ii) <i>Sandhya</i>      | b) Aurobindo Ghosh         |
| iii) <i>New India</i>   | c) Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya |

2 Discuss in about 10 lines that circumstances leading to the Swadeshi Movement.

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Write in about 100 words the techniques which evolved during the Swadeshi movement.

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4 What were the political trends which developed during the Swadeshi Movement? Write in about 5 lines.

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## 11.8 THE CONCEPT OF MASS MOVEMENT, WORKERS AND PEASANTS

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The national goal of *swaraj*, and the means to achieve it through boycott in all spheres, or through the method of passive resistance as it was then formulated necessitated not only a widespread awakening of the masses, but also their whole-hearted participation in well-organised anti-British mass movements. The educated middle class had by and large awakened with the progress of the Swadeshi movement and even some members of the landed aristocracy and the representatives of commercial and mercantile interests were becoming sympathetic to the national cause. But the vast majority of the poorer classes, especially the working class and the peasantry, had not yet been brought in the thick of the struggle.

### 11.8.1 Workers

Some of the *swadeshi* activists (notably Aswini Coomar Banerji, Prabhat Kusum Roychoudhury, Althanasius Apurba Kumar Ghosh and Premtosh Bose) did, however, try to organise workers in Bengal, and direct their economic grievances into political channels.

The lead in the direction came from 247 clerks of Burn Company in Howrah who struck work in September 1905 in protest against a derogatory new work regulation. This was followed by strikes in the tramways in Calcutta, in the jute mills and railway workshops. Coolies, carters and sweepers also took recourse to strikes in Calcutta to voice their economic demands. Such greater politicisation was noticed among the more militant printing press, jute mill and railway workers. A bitter strike in the Government owned presses resulted in the formation of the first real labour union, namely the Printers' Union in October 1905.

A similar struggle of the employees of the Eastern Indian Railway saw the organisation of a Railwaymen's Union in July 1906. There were attempts on the part of the *swadeshi* leaders like Bepin Chandra Pal, Shyamsundar Chakrabarthi and Liakat Hussain to organise agitated railway workers in Asansol, Ranigunj and Jamalpur, which ended up in police firing at the Jamalpur Workshop 27 August, 1906. The jute mill workers, who agitated almost on similar lines from 1905, were led by Aswini Coomar Banerji to form an Indian Millhands' Union at Budge-Budge in August 1906. However, all these unions later on suffered a set back in the face of the hostility of the Government. Not being ideologically committed to the cause of the workers, the enthusiasm of the nationalists in activating them steadily subsided after 1907.

### 11.8.2 Peasants



workmen, they practically refrained from rallying the peasants. Although the *samitis* had numerous branches in the rural areas (like the Swadeshbhandhav Samiti which alone had 175 village branches in Barisal district), preaching passive resistance to the masses, they failed to stir up the peasants' imagination. To the bulk of the impoverished *kisans*, their patriotic calls remained vague, distant and even abstractly rhetorical. The reason was the lack of genuine interest among these leaders in improving the agrarian situation, or in formulating concrete programmes for the betterment of the peasant masses. The members of the middle class in Bengal, whether, professionals, clerks or businessmen, depended substantially for their economic well-being on the rentals from their ancestral lands. Their rentier character had, therefore, placed them into an exploitative category *vis-a-vis* the exploited peasantry, and had perpetuated a contradiction between their interests and the peasants' aspirations. Already the Bengali middle class did not generally approve of the meagre tenurial rights which the Government had conceded to the cultivators in the Tenancy Act of 1885. Its representatives had often been intolerant of the "insolvent raiyats", and as *Bhadraloks* (gentlemen), they were contemptuous of the *Chhotoloks* (Lowly men).

The Swadeshi movement did not raise any voice of protest against the peasant's burden of debts, his periodic eviction from land or against his continued subjection to *begar* (unpaid forced labour). No *Samiti* gave any call to the cultivators for launching an agitation on the issues of exorbitant tax and rent. Even a radical spokesman of the stature of the Aurobindo Ghosh expressly ruled out such campaigns lest they should hurt the interests of patriotic *Zamindars* (Aurobindo Ghosh's articles in *Bande Mataram*, April 1907). What was worse, the strong religious overtone that the Swadeshi movement acquired in course of time — its undue emphasis on the Hindu revivalistic symbols and idioms — largely discouraged the Muslim peasants (who formed the bulk of the peasantry in east Bengal) from taking a lively interest in the great commotion.

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## 11.9 THE COMMUNAL TANGLE

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In traditional societies religion has often been used as a convenient means to arouse an indigenous and popular brand of nationalism, and it has usually led to unfortunate consequences. The experience of the Swadeshi movement was no different. The Political capital that the leaders in Bengal tried to make out of Hinduism and Islam contributed in effect to the widening of the gulf between the two major communities there. Dividing the land and the people of Bengal, and playing the Hindus and Muslims against each other, were the known British imperialist ideas. These were taken up 1905 by Curzon, Sir Andrew Fraser and Sir Herbert Risley, as it has already been pointed out, and their successors like Lord Minto (who replaced Curzon as the Viceroy), Sir Bampfylde Fuller (who was appointed as the first Lieutenant Governor of East Bengal and Assam) and Sir Lancelot Hare (who came in place of Fuller) devoutly clung to the same methods. While Minto was convinced of the necessity for the "diminution of the powers" of the Bengali politicians, Fuller actually started "playing one of the two sections of the population (Hindus and Muslims) against each other", and Hare thought of giving extraordinary advantages to the Muslims in matters of Government jobs over the Hindus.

Simultaneously with the wooing of the educated Muslims, the authorities encouraged the aristocratic elements among them to think in terms of Muslim Political Power and to form in October, 1906 the Muslim League, under the leadership of Nawab Salimullah of Dacca, to protect the "separate" interests of the Muslims. Besides in the eastern Bengal countryside the obscurantist *mullahs* and *maulavis* wielded much influence and often projected the contradiction between *Zamindars* (majority of whom happened to be Hindus) and cultivators (majority of whom happened to be Muslims) in terms only of religious antagonism.

Despite all this, however, eloquent pleas were heard during the Swadeshi movement in favour of communal harmony (such as the writings in Sanjivani). Great scenes of Hindu-Muslim fraternization were witnessed (such as the joint procession of 10,000 students in Calcutta on 23 September, 1906). Some distinguished Muslim publicmen took up leading roles in the agitation (such as Liakat Hussain, Abdul Hakim Ghaznavi, Abdul Rasul, Maniruzzaman, Ismail Hussain Siraji, Abul Hussain and Din Mahommed). But much of the effect of these positive developments was neutralised by the educated middle class nationalists' attempts at utilising the rites, images and myths of Hindu orthodoxy as a morale-booster for their rank and file, and as a medium of communication between the leaders and the led.

The stridently Hinduised exhortations of the nationalist organs like *Bande Mataram*, *Sandhya* and *Nabshakti*, the uncritical glorification of Hindu past, the nostalgia for the lost Hindu rashtra (nation), the practice of taking a pledge of *swadeshi* (for not using British goods) before a Hindu deity, the vow of self sacrifice before the goddess Kali and the constant references to the Gita did not help the political leaders in bringing the Muslims closer to the Hindus. Rather, these contributed to a hardening of attitudes on the part of both the communities. The observance of *Birashdami* (in memory of the eight Hindu heroes of the medieval past), the emphasis on traditional Hindu values in programmes for national education, the use of Pauranic images on public platform, the insistence on the goddess Durga's being "the visible representation of the eternal spirit" of the Bengalis harmed the movement considerably by the projection of its content in religious forms. Bepinchandra Pal justified such misrepresentation on the ground that religion and national life were inseparable, and that "to separate national life from religion would mean the abandonment of religious and moral values in personal life also" (Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, Delhi, 1977, p. 76). Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya went a step further, and urged his audience: "whatever you hear, whatever you learn, whatever you do—remain a Hindu, remain a Bengali...." Aurobindo Ghosh—editor *Bande Mataram*, went to the farthest point when he discovered germs of democracy, of even socialism, in the caste rules of Hindu society ("Caste and Democracy" *Bande Mataram*, 21 September, 1907). Such Hindu revivalistic propaganda at the height of the agitation, and that, too, by its leading figures, actually incited Nawab Salimullah's men and the *mullahs* to spread communal hatred among the Muslims in accordance of course, with the Curzonian expectations.

It was comparatively easy in such circumstances for the communalists to take recourse to communal violence. The eastern part of Bengal saw a series of communal riots, first in Ishwargunj in Mymensingh district in May 1906, followed by disturbances in Comilla, Jamalpur, Dewangunge and Bakshigunj in March 1907, and then again in Mymensingh in April-May 1907. The rioters were encouraged by the rumours, spread by communalists, of a British decision to hand over the charge of administration in Dacca to Nawab Salimullah. The riots also revealed a submerged agrarian character, since the targets were often found to be Hindu *Zamindars* and *Mahajans* (moneylenders). Although they were alarmed by these untoward developments, the nationalists would not try to understand the entire phenomena correctly. They seemed to be in a hurry to brand the rioters merely as British-hired trouble makers, without any serious effort at understanding the depth of the malaise. As a result, their religious fervour continued to increase rather than decrease.

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## 11.10 THE RISE OF REVOLUTIONARY TERRORISM

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A large-scale participation of the masses in the struggle for *Swaraj*—the essential precondition of a successful passive resistance—was not, however, realized. With little success among the workers, total failure in respect of the cultivators and sad mismanagement of the communal tangle, the Swadeshi movement was unable by a second half of 1907 to rise to its full potential, or assume the character of a mass upheaval. Besides, as an anti-imperialist agitation of great intensity, it had to bear continuously the repressive measures of its powerful opponent. The authorities prohibited the shouting of the slogan "Bande Mataram" in public places, disqualified from the Government employment all those who took part in the agitation in any form and expelled and fined student participants of the movement. Bands of Gurkha soldiers were sent to Barisal and other places to teach the agitators a lesson, and the police and the officials were given a free hand to heap indignities and launch physical assaults on them. The climax was reached in April 1906 when the delegates attending the provincial conference at Barisal were lathi-charged by the police. Then followed measures like exemplary caning of the picketers and institution of cases against them, banning of public meetings and processions, and innumerable arrests and convictions of persons, including Bepinchandra Pal and Liakat Hussain. The question of meeting force with force—using terror against terror—naturally came to the forefront.

A violent method also appealed to the romantic recklessness of the middle class youth of Bengal, who sought solace in heroic individual acts when mass actions did not materialize and who pinned their hopes on secret societies when open politics could not overwhelm the Government. The cult of violence was also attractive to those who were in a desperate hurry and whose patience had practically run out. "If we sit idle and hesitate to rise till the whole population is goaded to desperation", *Yugantar* argued in August 1907, "then we shall continue idle till the end of time...." The alternative was for the advanced elite section to

take up arms against the oppressors, strike terror in the hearts of the hated British officials and their henchmen, and arouse the masses by death-defying examples. Soon some of *samitis* grew exclusive inner circles, hatched conspiracies for selective assassinations and committed political robberies for raising funds to buy arms and ammunitions. These militant proceedings were spearheaded by the Yugantar group in Calcutta and the Anushilan Samiti in Dacca. Prafulla Chaki died and Khudiram Bose, a boy of 18, were hanged for their attempt on the life of a notorious British Magistrate Kingford who escaped unhurt. It also led in April 1908 to the discovery of a secret bomb manufacturing factory in the Manicktala area of Calcutta, and to the sensational asserts of some hard-core militants, including Aurobindo Ghosh. Revolutionary terrorism, however, took this set back in its stride. It continued to operate—even spread in other parts of India and abroad—as the clandestine legacy of the momentous, uproarious Swadeshi movement.

**Check Your Progress 3**

1 Why did the peasants not participate in the Swadeshi movement in a big way? Answer in about 10 lines

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2 Why do you think the communal situation worsened in 1906-07? Answer in about 10 lines.

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3 How did "Revolutionary terrorism" emerge in 1907-08? Answer in about 10 lines.

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## 11.11 LET US SUM UP

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The growth of revolutionary terrorism had certainly disturbed the British in India, but it could not challenge their authority as the open politics of *swadeshi* did, nor could it seriously threaten their rule as an ever-expanding mass mobilisation might have done. *Swadeshi* movement's failure to assume the stature of a mass upsurge, and the fact of its being eventually cornered into a secretive position, were manifestations of the presence of some of its weaknesses and limitations. But despite its many weaknesses, the degree of success it achieved at the levels of ideology, organisation and techniques of political struggle was not only astounding, but also innovative and in some respects far in advance of its time.

*Swadeshi* movement marked a total reversal of the earlier nationalist approach of "petitioning and praying" to the Raj for concessions, as well as a virtual rejection of the moderate political programme. It set before the Indian people the goal of *swaraj* or independence, and committed them to the task of doing away with Britain's imperialist stranglehold over India. For attainment of *swaraj*, it chartered out for the nation the path of "passive resistance" or civil disobedience of British authority, and relegated constitutionalism to a secondary position. The success of such resistance being conditional on extensive participation of the masses, the *Swadeshi* movement struggled hard to gain a popular base, and, despite, its failure to become a full-fledged mass upsurge, it nevertheless succeeded in leaving behind for the posterity the ideal of wide-spread mass struggle. With all these, and also with its scheme for "constructive *swadeshi*", the movement clearly anticipated the Gandhian mass struggles of the post-first world war period. Barring the principle of non-violence, Gandhiji's inspiring call from 1920 onwards for achieving *swaraj* through "non-cooperation," "civil disobedience" and "constructive programme" resembled closely with "boycott", "passive resistance" and "constructive *swadeshi*" of the Bengali political scenario preached and practised fifteen years ago. The *Swadeshi* movement had put up the stiffest Indian resistance to the Government of an arch-imperialist like Curzon, and after his departure from India in November 1905, to the succeeding Government of Minto. It became a contributing factor in the resignation of Fuller, the Lieutenant Governor of East Bengal and Assam, in August 1906, and forced the authorities eventually to annul the partition and re-unify Bengal in 1911. However there were hardly its major achievements in the larger nation-wide context. Its chief success lay in giving Indian nationalism a new imaginative direction, and in raising the state of nationalist unrest to the high plane of bitter anti-imperialist struggles.

As it invariably happens in all cases of political and social turmoil, the *Swadeshi* movement also left its deep marks on the cultural and intellectual activities of Bengal; with their fall-outs spread over different parts of the country. Apart from a rich crop of patriotic compositions, playwritings and dramatic performances, it generated the Bengal School of Painting under the leadership of Rabindranath Tagore, kindled scientific enquiries under the supervision of Jagadish Chandra Bose and Prafulla Chandra Roy, revived interest in the folk traditions through the labours of Dinesh Chandra Sen and invigorated historical research with the help of the findings of Rakhaldas Banerji, Hariprasad Shastri and Akshay Kumar Maitra.

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## 11.12 KEY WORDS

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**Authoritarianism:** A phenomenon in which authority is imposed without taking into account the popular will.

**Ideologues:** People who are involved in propagating certain ideology.

**Political Extremism:** A phenomenon in which ultra militant methods are used to solve political problems.

**Politicisation:** A process by which politics becomes a part of the way people think about life.

**Racial arrogance:** Feeling of racial superiority over others.

**Religious Revivalism:** A phenomenon in which the religious past is totally evoked to justify certain present objectives or notions.

**Partition of Bengal and the Swadeshi Movement**

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## 11.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i)  $\sqrt{\quad}$       ii)  $\times$       iii)  $\times$       iv)  $\times$   
2 See Section 11.3

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1 i) b      • ii) c      iii) a  
2 See Section 11.5  
3 See Section 11.6  
4 See Section 11.7

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1 See Section 11.8  
2 See Section 11.9  
3 See Section 11.10

### **Some Useful Books**

Chandra Bipan, 1979. *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*, Orient Longman, New Delhi.

Desai, A.R. (ed.), 1979. *Peasant Struggles in India*, Oxford University Press, Bombay.

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Sarkar, Sumit, 1983. *Modern India 1885-1947*, Macmillan, New Delhi.

Tarachand, 1983. *History of the Freedom Movement in India*. Publication Division, New Delhi (Vols. II & III).