

The Swadeshi movement: a nation awakens

In the summer of 1905, the decision to partition Bengal split more than just land; it fractured communities, provoked anger and awakened a new kind of politics. The justification was administrative efficiency, but Indian nationalists saw something more sinister. With Bengal being the epicentre of political agitation, the British aimed to divide and dilute resistance.

In town halls and on dusty village roads, a cry echoed: Swadeshi – literally ‘of one’s own country’. Initially rooted in the desire to oppose the partition, it became much more. The Swadeshi movement marked the first widespread, organised act of passive resistance and self-assertion. Political protests, public speeches and petitions formed the early methods. But as it became clear that these moderate efforts bore little fruit, something more radical took hold.

Boycott became the watchword. British textiles, sugar, salt and schools were rejected. In their place emerged an infrastructure of indigenous pride: Swadeshi schools, vernacular education and Indian-manufactured goods. Even attire became political. Women refused foreign bangles and clothes, while washermen and priests refused to handle or accept anything foreign. The spirit of protest crept into everyday life, making daily consumption a political act.

On 7 August 1905, the Swadeshi movement was formally launched in Calcutta. By 16 October, the date on which the partition was enacted, mass mobilisation was in full force. That day was marked as one of mourning. In Calcutta, people marched barefoot to the Ganges, sang patriotic songs and tied *rakhis* on each other as symbols of unity. A total of Rs. 50,000 (around £15,000 today) was raised in a single day to support the movement, revealing the growing commitment among ordinary Indians.

Beyond protest, the movement built. The National Council of Education, established in 1906, was one such initiative, aimed at promoting Indian values and knowledge. Students boycotted British institutions and, despite the risk of losing scholarships or government jobs or facing arrest, they persisted. Calcutta University was dubbed ‘*Gulamkhana*’, the House of Slave, by students who deserted it en masse. Education became a battlefield, and vernacular nationalist schooling became a tool of liberation.

Culture, too, became a vehicle of Swadeshi. Rabindranath Tagore and Dwijendralal Ray composed songs that stirred hearts. Artists like Abanindranath Tagore abandoned Victorian styles and turned to Mughal, Rajput and Ajanta aesthetics to craft a distinctly Indian artistic identity. In science, Indian pioneers like Jagadish Chandra Bose and Prafulla Chandra Ray began to receive recognition for their work, part of the movement’s broader vision of self-reliance.

The role of women in the Swadeshi movement was notable. They not only rejected foreign clothes and bangles but also joined picketing lines and endured state repression. Their presence in the public and political sphere was radical for the time, marking a subtle but profound shift in the gendered boundaries of Indian resistance.

Swadeshi spread to the villages through gatherings and meetings, which not only carried the political message but also provided social services, such as famine relief and public health support. These festivals and societies introduced nationalism into the cultural rhythms of rural life, making the movement far more embedded than previous elite-led actions.

Yet there were limitations. While the movement drew in many from Bengal’s Hindu middle class, Muslim participation was far lower. The colonial state actively promoted communal division, portraying the Congress as a Hindu body and encouraging Muslim leaders to form the Muslim League. Furthermore, the Hindu landlords’ dominance, contrasting with the Muslim peasantry’s marginalisation, made it difficult for Swadeshi to unify the population. Certain forms of mobilisation, such as overt use of Hindu festivals,

further alienated Muslim communities. This gap in inclusivity would later haunt the nationalist project. Still, the Swadeshi movement remains a milestone. It introduced new methods, including boycott, cultural renewal, self-help, national education and vernacular revival, which became staples of later freedom struggles.

By 1908, however, the fervour began to wane. The British cracked down, with bans, arrests and press restrictions. The movement also fractured internally, especially after the Congress split in Surat in 1907 between moderates and extremists. Without a durable organisational structure, the momentum proved hard to sustain. Nevertheless, it inspired a generation, laying the foundations for Gandhi's mass movements a decade later.

Bibliography

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