

17. PARTITION OF BENGAL

They hoped to stem the rising tide of nationalism in Bengal, considered at the time to be the nerve centre of Indian nationalism.

Risely, Home Secretary to the Government of India, wrote in an official note on 6 December 1904 as

Bengal united is a power. Bengal divided will pull in several different ways. One of our main objective is to split up and thereby to weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule.

The Indian National Congress and the Nationalists of Bengal firmly opposed the partition.

Within Bengal, different sections of the population - zamindars, merchants, lawyers, students, the city poor, and even women - rose up in spontaneous opposition to the partition of their province.

The nationalists saw the act of partition as a challenge to Indian nationalism and not merely an administrative measure.

They saw that it was a deliberate attempt to divide the Bengali territorial and on religious grounds - for in the Eastern part Muslims would be in a big majority and in the western part Hindus - and thus to disrupt and weaken nationalism in Bengal.

It would also be a big blow to the growth of Bengali language and culture.

They pointed out that administrative efficiency could have been better secured by separating the Hindi speaking Bihar and the Oriya-speaking Orissa from the Bengali speaking part of the province.

Moreover, the official step had been taken in utter disregard of public opinion.

Thus the vehemence of Bengal's protest against the partition is explained by the fact that it was a blow to the sentiments of very sensitive and courageous people.

The Anti-Partition Movement

- The Anti-Partition Movement was the work of the entire national leadership of Bengal and not of any one section.
- Its most prominent leaders at the initial stage were moderate leaders like Surendra Nath Banerjee and Krishna Kumar Mitra; militants and revolutionary nationalists took over in the later stages.
- In fact, both the moderate and militant nationalists co-operated with one another during the course of the movement.

- The Anti-Partition Movement was initiated on 7 August 1905. On the day a massive demonstration against partition was organised in the Town Hall in Calcutta.
- From this meeting delegates dispersed to spread the movement to the rest of the province.
- The partition took effect on 16 October 1905.
- The leaders of the protest movement declared it to be a day of national mourning throughout Bengal.
- It was observed as a day of fasting. There was a Hartal in Calcutta.
- People walked barefooted and bathed in the Ganga in the morning hours.
- Rabindranath Tagore composed the national song, 'Amar Sonar Bangla', for the occasion which was sung by huge crowds parading the streets.
- This song was adopted as its national anthem by Bangladesh in 1971 after Liberation.
- The streets of Calcutta were full of the cries of 'Bande Mataram' which overnight became the national song of Bengal and which was sung to become the theme song of the national movement.
- The ceremony of Raksha Bandhan was utilized in a new way.
- Hindus and Muslims tied the rakhi on one another's wrists as a symbol of the unbreakable unity of the Bengalis and of the two halves of Bengal.
- In the afternoon, there was a great demonstration when the veteran leader Ananda Mohan Bose laid the foundation of a Federation Hall to mark the indestructible unity of Bengal.

The Swadeshi and Boycott

- The Bengal leaders felt that more demonstrations, public meetings and revolutions were not likely to have much effect on the rulers.
- More positive action that would reveal the intensity of popular feelings and exhibit them at their best was needed.
- The answer was Swadeshi and Boycott.
- Mass meetings were held all over Bengal where Swadeshi or the use of Indian goods and the boycott of British goods were proclaimed and pledged.

- In many places public burning of foreign cloth were organised and shops selling foreign cloth were picketed. The Swadeshi Movement was an immense success.
- An important aspect of the Swadeshi Movement was the emphasis placed on self-reliance or 'Atmasakti'.
- Self-reliance meant assertion of national dignity, honour and self-confidence.
- In the economic field, it meant fostering indigenous industrial and other enterprises.
- Many textile mills, soda and match factories, handloom weaving concerns, national banks and insurance companies were opened.
- Acharya P.C. Ray Organised his famous Bengal Chemical Swadeshi Stores.
- Even the great Rabindranath Tagore helped to open a Swadeshi store.
- The Swadeshi Movement had several consequences in the realm of Culture.
- There was a flowering of nationalist poetry, prose and journalism.
- The patriotic songs written at the time by poets like Rabindranath Tagore, Rajani Kant Sen. Syed Abu Mohammed and Mukunda Das are sung in Bengal to this day.
- Another self-reliant, constructive activity undertaken at the time was that of National Education. National Educational Institutes where literary, technical or physical education was imparted were opened by nationalists who regarded the existing system of education as denationalising and, in any case, inadequate.
- On 15 August 1906, a National Council of Education was set up. A National College with Aurobindo Ghose as Principal was started in Calcutta.

Role of Students, Women, Muslims and the Masses

- A prominent part in the Swadeshi agitation was played by the students of Bengal.
- They practised and propagated Swadeshi and took the lead in organising picketing of shops selling foreign cloth.
- The government made every attempt to suppress the students.
- Orders were issued to penalise those schools and colleges whose students took an active part in the Swadeshi agitation; their grants-in-aid and other privileges were to be withdrawn, they were to be disaffiliated, their students were not to be permitted to compete for scholarships and were to be barred from all services under the government.
- Disciplinary action was taken against students found guilty of participating in the nationalist agitation. Many of them were fined, expelled from schools and colleges, arrested and sometimes beaten by the police with lathis.
- A remarkable aspect of the Swadeshi agitation was the active participation of women in the movement.
- The traditionally home-centred women of the urban middle classes joined processions and picketing. From then on they were to take an active part in the nationalist movement.
- Many prominent Muslims joined the Swadeshi Movement including Abdul Rasul, the famous barrister, Liaquat Hussain, the popular agitator and Guznavi, the businessman.
- Maulana Abul Kalam Azad joined one of the revolutionary terrorist groups.
- Many other middle and upper class Muslims, however, remained neutral or, led by the Nawab of Dhaka (who was given a loan of Rs. 14 lakh by the Government of India), even supported Partition on the plea that East Bengal would have a Muslim majority.
- In this communal attitude, the Nawab of Dhaka and others were encouraged by the officials.
- In a speech at Dhaka, Lord Curzon declared that one of the reasons for the partition was to invest the Mohammedans in Eastern Bengal with a unity which they had not enjoyed since the days of the old Musalman Viceroys and Kings.

All-India Aspect of the Movement

- The cry to Swadeshi and Swaraj was soon taken up by other provinces of India.
- Movements in support of Bengal's unity and boycott of foreign goods were organised in Bombay, Madras and northern India.
- The leading role in spreading the Swadeshi Movement to the rest of the country was played by Tilak.
- Tilak quickly saw that with the inauguration of this movement in Bengal a new chapter in the history of Indian nationalism had opened.
- Here was a challenge and an opportunity to lead to a popular struggle against the British Raj and to unite the entire country in one bond of common sympathy.