The Swadeshi Movement and Bengali Theatre*

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Any consideration of the history of 19th- and early-20th-century Bengal these days almost invariably tends to make nationalism and/or modernity its nucleus. Theorists quarrel among themselves over the definition of the two concepts, often dismissing them as derivative discourses and trying to prove that they are actually rooted in the pre-colonial past. Whatever may be the areas of difference, anti-British nationalism appears to be a political and cultural project which we cannot ignore in framing a narrative of political action and reaction in Bengal in the latter half of the 19th century, defined more clearly in the first few decades of the 20th century. A turning back to the colonial period is in search not of a comprehensive or 'correct' understanding of the past *per se*, but of the 19th-century agendas which maintain a continuing hold on contemporary ones. The past, then, not as a living tradition one must reconnect with, or a crippling inheritance to be laid aside, or even as a definite stage to be transcended, but as a hidden history of structural and discursive determinations which stealthily deflect, reappropriate, and even control contemporary initiative.

In the last two decades, several studies have pointed to dimensions of nationalism hardly touched upon earlier. The nature of the national bourgeoisie, subaltern movements, the recovery of self, nationalist historiography, nationalist aesthetics, messianic movements, the woman question, films, theatre, art and literary history have all come in for scrutiny. Subjects like these have been explored because it has been increasingly felt that nationalism, its emergence and development, its contemporary presence, is a more complex, contradictory, and shifting phenomenon than earlier theses suggested. Dissatisfaction with conceptual inheritances, liberal and Marxist, which make clear distinctions between 'reactionary' and 'progressive', and assign nationalism to one or the other category, has also supplied the motivation for these researches. There has also been the conviction that any study of nationalism should reckon with the decisive and specific logic of the colonial situation. These studies mark themselves off from earlier ones because they attempt to theorize the colonial context in which nationalism emerged, as much as they theorize nationalism itself[1]. The present study has a similar goal, and selects for investigation the Swadeshi movement in Bengal (which opposed the partition of the province in 1905), and the interaction of the movement with the contemporary theatre. This involves, inevitably, laying down in some detail the political background of Swadeshi, together with some comments on the nature of the contemporary politics.

The central problematic of colonialism in India was the response of the colonized to the dominant cultural canon imposed by colonial rule, forcing the colonized to confront their own identity. Bengali plays of the period played an extremely important role in this respect, even as they articulated an ideology of national liberation. The Bengali theatre grew

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with a sense of (often false) historicity, and was used purposively as a platform for Swadeshi. Serious attention was here given to the nation as a cultural project. As a matter of fact, between 1905 and 1912, no medium of art in Bengal failed to express either an open or a subterranean feeling of injured pride and anguished protest. Poetry, music, and theatre were the earliest, and most intensely affected.

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Defending the partition of Bengal in 1905, the Viceroy, Lord Minto, wrote to Lord Morley on 5 February 1906[2]:

> It is the growing power of a population with great intellectual gifts and a talent for making itself heard, a population which though is very far from representing the more manly characteristics of the many races of India, is not unlikely to influence public opinion at home most mischievously. Therefore from a political point of view alone, putting aside the administrative difficulties of the old province, I believe partition to have been necessary.

Bengal was already moving towards partition when Curzon had started his so-called streamlining. There was a reduction of elected elements in the Calcutta Corporation, and a Universities Act was passed to heighten bureaucratic control. The Official Secrets Act was passed to curb freedom of the press. There was rampant racial discrimination, drain of wealth, and repeated famines and epidemics which plagued Bengal through the 1890s.

The idea of partition was toyed with from 1903 by Sir Andrew Frazer, and finally a new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam was created comprising the Chittagong, Dacca and Rajashahi divisions, Hill Tippera, Malda and Assam. The formal proclamations came on 1 September and 16 October 1905. Bengal was partitioned on the grounds of "administrative convenience": it would relieve excessive burden on the Bengal government, expansion of Assam would give its officers a wider and more interesting field to work in, and a maritime outlet would be provided to develop its industries in tea, oil and coal. But evidently the deep-rooted design was to 'divide and rule' the people of Bengal and curb the emerging national movement. Apart from this, there was widespread anti-Bengali feeling in British official circles. Indeed, Amales Tripathi says: "The genesis of the partition of Bengal had nothing to do with Curzon's determination to crush a seditious Congress. It had its origins in the anti-Bengali prejudice among the civilians, growing to monstrous proportions in the latter half of the 19th century"[3].

Moderates in the Congress consisted of sub-groups — loyalist aristocrats, cautious politicians of the Mehta-Gokhale group, and the Bengal group. Extremists in turn were divided among themselves. While the Tagore group advocated self-help and autonomous development ignoring British rule, others felt that British rule was incompatible with national progress and wanted to prepare for its overthrow, forcing the British to leave the country.

The partition of Bengal took the Bengal moderates well beyond the limits of old-style petitioning. Surendranath Banerjee toured the whole of the country making speeches for the boycott of Manchester cloth and Liverpool salt. The moderates also participated, though hesitatingly, in the national educational movement. Men like Krishnakumar Mitra and

Ambikacharan Mazumdar became very closely associated with the militant volunteer and Samiti movements, and other moderate leaders gave support and advice to striking workers of the East Indian Railways. Stories even circulated of some of the biggest moderate leaders not being averse to secretly giving monetary aid to the first groups of young terrorists. The history of the moderates between 1905 and 1908 reveals in fact a rather delicate balance between the hopes they harboured and the frustration they met with.

Extremism in Bengal was a protest against the English-educated elite leadership, and its method of prayer and petition. Self-reliance and constructive work were the new slogans, with new Swadeshi enterprises and education as an integral part of the agenda. Use of the vernacular, traditional customs, and institutions like the *mela* or fair were to be encouraged. Meanwhile, Tilak and Lala Lajpat Rai had blazed an extremist trail in trail in Maharashtra and Punjab, and this created a sensation in Calcutta in the early months of 1905.

Initially, the Congress avoided taking up the cause of Bengal. In 1903, the Madras session of the Congress passed a resolution which denounced the proposed partition, but only half-heartedly. In fact, the majority of members on the Subjects Committee objected to the resolution on the grounds that the proposed partition did not constitute an "All-India" problem. They waived their objection only on account of the pressure of the Bengali delegates[4]. Even in the 1904 Bombay session, the desire to discuss the resolution was minimal[5].

About the power of the Bengali leadership within the Congress, and their persistent opposition to any division of Bengal, Lord Curzon had earlier written to John Brodrick:

> Calcutta is the centre from which the Congress party is manipulated throughout the whole of Bengal and indeed the whole of India. Its best wirepullers and its most frothy orators all reside there. They dominate public opinion in Calcutta, they affect the High Court, they frighten the local Government, and they are sometimes not without serious influence upon the Government of India. The whole of their activity is directed to create an agency so powerful, that they may one day be able to force a weak government to give them what they desire. Any measure in consequence that would divide the Bengali speaking population, that would permit independent centres of activity and influence to grow up, that would dethrone Calcutta from its place as the centre of successful intrigue or that would weaken the influence of the lawyer class who have the entire organisation in their hands is intensely and hotly resented by them.[6]

The anti-partition movement took some time to gather momentum . A Bengali newspaper, *Sanjibani*, gave the first call to "Boycott" on 22 June 1905, and *The Bengalee* accepted it on 12 August 1905. A lukewarm resolution was moved at the historic Town Hall meeting of 7 August 1905: the moderate motto still seemed defence, not defiance. Surendranath Banerjee, the Maharaja of Kasim Bazar, Manindra Chandra Nandi, Maulavi Hasibuddin Ahmed, all took a vow to take up Swadeshi and Boycott, and forced the Congress to adopt an appropriate resolution in its Calcutta session in 1906. The slogan of 'Bande Mataram,' and Rabindranath Tagore's *'Amar sonar Bangla, ami tomay bhalobashi'* ('My golden Bengal, I love you') rent the air[7].

A clear-cut (if erroneous) theory of economics emerged from the movement. The idea was that if a fillip was to be given to indigenous industry, then practising Swadeshi was essential, and only if foreign goods were boycotted could this actually happen. Performing artists and

painters entered the political arena in 1905, and the call for self-reliance spilled over into the domain of art, encouraging artists to use it as a political weapon. Cultural autonomy was to complement economic self-sufficiency. Abanindranath Tagore's 'Bharat Mata', his only painting with an overt political message, was produced during the Swadeshi unrest. In the economic sphere, the famines of 1897 and 1899 had emphasized the poverty of the Indian masses. Dadabhai Naoroji's *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901), William Digby's *Prosperous British India* (1901), and R.C. Dutt's *The Economic History of British India* (1901) all protested against the drain of India's wealth to England, and the impoverishment of India's peasants.

With the rise of the professional middle class in Bengal, aided by the educational and economic policies of the British, the *palli samaj* (village society) had virtually broken up. A section of the youth had left the villages and come away to urban areas in search of new employments. But during the Swadeshi movement it was the model of the village as an economic unit that guided the leaders in the metropolis to determine the future line of action. The question arose as to whether Swadeshi was a matter of society, and Boycott a matter of politics. There were differences of opinion among both the moderates and extremists, as well as among intellectuals. Rabindranath Tagore, for example, thought that it was unfair to impose Boycott on the poorest of the poor, who would not be able to afford indigenous substitutes. There was a great deal of activity in the field of indigenous 'national' education, which pre-dates the call to Swadeshi by several years. Vivekananda, who had passed away in 1902, was one of its ardent advocates: "The ideal therefore is that we must have the whole education of our country, spiritual and secular, in our hands, and it must be on national lines, through national methods as far as practical"[8]. Vivekananda's follower Sister Nivedita, Rabindranath Tagore, Satishchandra Mukhopadhyay, Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray, and Ramendrasundar Trivedi were among other prominent workers in this field. Rabindranath had already founded the Brahma Vidyalaya and Santiniketan in 1901. Satishchandra Mukhopadhyay did pioneering work with the Dawn Society through its chronicle *Dawn*. Meanwhile, the Carlyle Circular was issued on 22 October 1905 to curb student protest; soon after, it was decided to boycott all university education. A Bengal National College (which became the nucleus of the future Jadavpur University) and school were set up in 1906 to provide education in science and technology. Technical institutes were set up to provide vocational training for employment. Mills, banks, and handicraft boards were formed[9]. Preference was shown for handloom, and the *charkha* was both practically used and symbolically promoted. This was indeed the first serious attempt by Indians to take their economic destiny in their own hands.

The Swadeshi idea was to raise the political consciousness of the pallis and inspire the rural folk to work for development. The propagation was through lectures as well as Jatras and songs, which were more effective with the masses. Ashwini Kumar Dutt and Charan Kabi Mukundadas were two well-known personalities involved in this programme. The former wrote to zamindars to stop the sale of foreign goods in their bazars (though not many responses were forthcoming). However, although Swadeshi had a specifically economic aspect, it also contained a sentiment associated with many other phases of Indian nationalism as observed by historian Sumit Sarkar. Indigenous goods were to be preferred by con-

sumers even if they were more expensive than — and inferior to — their imported substitutes, and it was the patriotic duty of men with capital to pioneer such industries, even though profits might initially be minimal or non-existent. Swadeshi, thus, is a term of narrower scope than indigenous enterprise, "much of which could, and often did, follow the more profitable frankly comprador lines"[10]. It also seems that Swadeshi and Boycott meant various things to various people in the nationalist leadership. To Surendranath Banerjee the only aim of Boycott was to call the attention of the British public to Bengal's grievance about the partition; when the decision was reversed, the Boycott was to cease. For Gokhale, Boycott was a political weapon, to be used with the definite purpose of industrial regeneration. For Lal, Bal, Pal — the militant trio — Boycott had double implications: Materially, it was to put economic pressure on Manchester, which would produce a chain reaction on the Indian government; from a spiritual point of view, it meant the dispelling of the *maya* of British power, and a necessary sacrifice for Swaraj. Tilak called it "the Yoga of Bahishkar", a ritual of rejection; it was also a training in self-help, determination and sacrifice. To Aurobindo, it was not merely a movement for autonomy and wealth, but a return to faith in India's role as world saviour. The day of partition, 16 October 1905, was observed as Rakhi Bandhan day at the suggestion of Rabindranath Tagore. Thousands of people walked barefoot to the Ganga and took a dip. There was even an appeal for *arandhan* ('no cooking' in households) as a sign of mourning.

Perhaps no aspect of nationalism in Bengal in the early 1900s has received more attention than the revolutionary terrorism generated by it[11]. Though unsurpassable in its romantic appeal, it is a difficult period to reconstruct in the absence of first-hand sources. Private papers have largely not survived, and records — the little that are available — are distorted. It would seem that Bengal was tired of the Congress's mendicant ways and sought revolutionary terrorism as a panacea. Terrorist activities were primarily led by two groups, the Anushilan Samiti (founded in 1902) and Yugantar (1906). The first political murder was planned by Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki in 1902 — an attempt on the life of an English District Magistrate, Kingsford. (The bomb actually killed two Englishwomen, and not the magistrate.) Many youngsters who were impatient took to terrorist methods subsequently.

Extremism in Indian politics manifested a marked resemblance to what Toynbee would call "archaism". It was a response to the challenge of a haphazard and superficial westernization of Indian life, thought and politics. According to Amales Tripathi, the movement of resistance could be discussed on three planes. Spiritually, it countered a threat to the traditional Hindu religion, ethics, and social values posed by Christianity and Utilitarianism, as well as Brahmoism which was strongly influenced by both. Culturally, it resisted a mechanistic, materialistic, and individualistic civilization which seemed to be destroying or distorting the indigenous tissues of social growth. Politically, it withstood a slow merger of 'Indian' identity in the vast British empire. A rebound from the mimesis of the West, it however oscillated to another extreme: mimesis of ancient India[12]. Born of a psychology of fear, it inculcated aggressiveness in tone and temper. It bred an equally unhealthy orthodoxy among the largely Hindu middle classes of Bengal.

Bengali plays during this period had a spirit of romanticism and adventure clearly influenced by revolutionary terrorism. Much of the literature of the time was inspired by the

writings of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, particularly his novel *Anandamath* with its slogan of 'Bande Mataram' for the Santan Sampradaya. This novel was taken up by the young revolutionary theorist Aurobindo Ghosh and treated as a political tract, with Bankim himself being hailed as the seer of the nationalist movement. In a series of eleven articles titled 'New Lamps for Old', Aurobindo strongly criticized the mendicancy of the Congress. Together with other leaders like Ashwini Kumar Dutt and Barin Ghosh, he was seriously thinking in terms of an armed uprising. Aurobindo's *Bhawani Mandir*, a pamphlet published in 1905, was about Shakti as a cult for revolutionary terrorism. For Aurobindo, the means to the end of political emancipation was turning it into an end in itself[13].

Extremist leaders (all upper-caste Hindus) used religion to mobilize support for their cause, and thus patriotism took on the colour of Hindu revivalism. The identification of patriotism with religion found expression in the *puja* of Durga or Kali as Motherland—a symbolism going back to Bankim Chandra. Tilak's visit to Bengal in June 1906 to celebrate the Shivaji festival, on which occasion he compared 'Bande Mataram' to Shivaji's worship of the goddess Bhawani (Kali in Bengal), was further encouragement to the revolutionaries. In fact, by this time, Shivaji had become established as an icon of Indian resistance in the Bengali Hindu mind. The process had begun with Rameshchandra Dutt's *Maharashtra Jiban Prabhat* (1878), and continued with Tilak's Shivaji festivals (in Maharashtra), to be emulated by Tagore's Shivaji Utsav (1904). Not surprisingly, Shivaji was a venerated figure in many plays of the time.

Vows on the Gita were taken on initiation into revolutionary politics, tantric vows were also not unknown among the militants. Sister Nivedita gave a startling reinterpretation of the Goddess as incarnated in the sword. Bankim Chandra, in *Krishna Charitra*, presented Krishna as a hero who would redeem the world. Tilak wrote a commentary on the Gita, and Aurobindo contributed the introductory chapter to it. Lajpat Rai compiled an Urdu 'biography' of Krishna, and Ashwini Kumar Dutt expatiated on *bhaktiyoga*. Even Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, who was a Roman Catholic for a brief period in his life, wrote *Srikrishnatattva*, and Bipin Chandra Pal, a rationalist Brahmo, fell under the neo-Vaishnavite spell of Bijoy Krishna Goswami to proclaim Sri Krishna to be "the soul of India". *Dharmarajya* was equated with *swarajya*, and terrorism was understood as *dharmayuddha*. But while extremism was partly indebted to Bankim, Vivekananda and Dayanand for its ideology, it was not for its political *raison d'être*. The extremist purpose was primarily to oppose the moderates who had accepted the British 'mission' in India at its face value and had become complacent and trusting.

Terrorism, however, petered out due to lack of popular support, and internal differences in tactics. The government resorted to severe repression. It banned public meetings, censored the press, and engaged in savage persecutions. The more covert the revolutionaries became, the harder the government came down on them. The terrorists did not win their battle, but they did pose a challenge to their colonial rulers. Therefore it needs to be stated that the common belief that India's freedom movement was non-violent is ill-founded.

The early phase of Swadeshi had the support of most Muslims. Some Muslim communities hoped for gains from Swadeshi policies, for example the weavers who stood to benefit from a rejection of British cloth; indeed, the singers of Bakarganj had composed songs on this subject. Just before the partition, in September 1905, ten thousand Hindus and Muslims

demonstrated their unity at Rajabazar. In that congregation, Abdul Rasool, a Swadeshi enthusiast, declared that there was only one motherland — Bangladesh[14]. Mohammad Yusuf, Chairman of the Swadeshi Sabha, proposed a Milan Mandir for Hindus and Muslims on the day of the partition. But the British had also been able to entice some Muslim leaders with the spoils of a divide. In 1905, the Nawab of Dacca together with some other Muslim leaders actively supported the partition. The Agha Khan sent a proposal to Lord Minto for separate electorates for Muslims, which was accepted. The Dacca Muslim League was formed in the same year (1905). It was also the year of the establishment of the Hindu Mahasabha, which remained active up to 1908.

The correspondence between class and religious affiliation in Bengal lay behind the emergence of communal politics in this era — and its success. Bengal had a predominantly Hindu landowning class and a predominantly Muslim tenantry. Inevitably, the dominant upper-caste Hindu *bhadralok*, politically organized under the Congress, sought to preserve the privileges of the zamindari and the intermediate rentier interests, while the Muslim leaders of East Bengal, relying on the support of the Muslim *praja*, sought to uphold the rights of *raiyats* and found themselves in opposition to the Congress. There was also the attraction of a separate constituency and a larger share of power. The new Muslim leadership of East Bengal was thus convinced of its need for an independent political organization, which inevitably took an anti-Hindu stance.

This could happen only because the Swadeshi movement was essentially an upper-caste Hindu bhadralok affair, which by its ideology and practices had alienated both the Muslim masses and the gentry. Revivalism served as a stimulus for radicalism and deepened Muslim alienation. In all spheres of the Swadeshi enterprise, religion was used as a motivating factor. This could only bring about a breach in Hindu-Muslim relations. The riots in 1906 – 7 proved that the call to Swadeshi and Boycott could not overcome this deepening divide.

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The political and social concerns of the Swadeshi movement were aptly reflected in the theatre of the period. Indeed, the theatre was harnessed for political ends during this era. The plays had no apparently subversive ideology — the censorship laws saw to that — but nationalism and patriotism were propagated in the garb of other themes. The political leaders chanelled the issues of the day into dramatic literature. The playwrights[15] gave political interpretations to history and myth. The swadeshi Jatra became a great force in rural Bengal, motivating people to adopt the way of Swadeshi. Nationalist consciousness infused this traditional form, making it a vehicle of political propaganda.

Theatres in Calcutta became venues of public meetings for political purposes. At a series of meetings in the Star Theatre on 3 August, at the Albert Hall on 5 August, and at the Grand Theatre on 15 August 1905, B.C. Pal urged the extension of Boycott to titles, government services and functions. Two hundred students in the Star Theatre responded to Pal's call to sign a pledge not to take employment under the government[16]. (The passive resistance programme formulated by B.C. Pal and Aurobindo Ghosh anticipated, in fact, Gandhi's political programme except for the dogma of non-violence). This was all enunciated in public

theatres: the stage was now a political space.

Devastation, economic drain, Swadeshi, Boycott, were heard and discussed everywhere — not only in formal treatises and newspaper articles but also in songs, plays and Jatras. Much was written in favour of the charkha, which would (supposedly) provide employment to rural women, and would also end the embarrassment of Swadeshi handlooms depending on Lancashire imports for yarn of finer counts. A contemporary play, Amritalal Basu's *Shabash Bangali* (1905), ends with village women going back to the charkha.

In 1905 the Star Theatre produced D.L. Roy's *Rana Pratap*. On the day of the actual partition, the theatre observed mourning. An advertisement in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* said: 'Mourning at Star! / Partition of Bengal / No Amusement at the Star Theatre / On Wednesday 6 September / Amritalal Bose / Manager[17]. A series of historical plays followed the announcement. This was a period of vigorous patriotic poetry and song, and inspired some of the well-known songs of Rabindranath Tagore, D.L. Roy, and Mukundadas[18]. The image of 1905 which has survived in the collective memory of Bengal is in fact inextricably bound up with Swadeshi songs[19].

A large number of patriotic plays had already been written during the 1860s and 1870s, and were the immediate cause for the passage of Lytton's Dramatic Performances Act in 1876. Then, for about twenty years, the political interest was swamped almost entirely by religious and other themes. An important dramatist of the time, Girish Chandra Ghosh (1877-1912), for example, concentrated on Puranic themes or sentimental domestic drama. (It may be unfair to characterize Girish's plays as such, because Girish has also been interpreted as an intelligent user of allegory.) The Swadeshi movement brought about a sudden swing in fashion back to historical plays of patriotic content. In January 1906, no less that five such plays were staged at the Star and Minerva, the two leading theatres of Calcutta: Kshirodeprasad Vidyavinode's *Padmini*, D.L. Roy's *Pratapsingha*, Amritalal Basu's *Shabash Bangali*, Girish Ghosh's *Siraj-ud-doula*, and Haranath Bose's *Jagaran*.

In the first phase of his career, Girish Ghosh wrote plays based on mythic or devotional lore, like *Rabana Badh* (1881) and *Chaitanya Leela* (1884). He was later an ardent follower of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. None could surpass him in reading the directions that popular sentiment would take. Thus when the Swadeshi upsurge hit the stage, he chose to write plays on some of the heroes of the land. Judging from these, his ideal nation would seem to be a united Hindu *rashtra*, as indeed declared in the play *Chhatrapati Shivaji*. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on 18 March 1908 reported that *Chhatrapati Shivaji* by Girish Ghosh was staged at the Kohinoor Theatre on 15 March, "in the company of Sreejukta Bepin Chandra Pal who had kindly accepted the invitation to grace the occasion". This was theatre's way of striking an alliance with the political leaders of the time.

Utpal Dutt, noted playwright and actor, however strongly felt that Girish employed religious and other themes to critique middle-class morality[20]. In *Siraj-ud-doula*, Girish indeed catches Indian society at the crossroads, with a ruthless amoral clique of merchants wresting power from a feudal chief through treachery and deceit, while his subjects watch helplessly. Karim Chacha in *Siraj-ud-doula* is the voice of these two systems in conflict — a parallel figure to Siraj, and almost his alter ego.

D.L. Roy's plays, on the other hand, displayed a will both to preserve and reconstruct tradition. His themes were historical. *Rana Pratapsingha* (1905), for example, demonstrates how, in order to regenerate itself, religion would have to drop its ritualism and narrow outlook. The Star Theatre began showing the play on 22 July 1905. The sensation was so great that on the first night four hundred people returned disappointed for want of tickets[21] *Mewar Patan* also reinforces this ideology, but perhaps pushes the agenda too far for general acceptance. In this play a Muslim character, Mohabat Khan, makes an analysis of the 'true nature' of the Hindus, when he says: "So much hatred! No wonder this race has always been subjected to Islam. This is their supposedly liberal Sanatan Dharma? Muslims at least can boast of accepting all non-Muslims [into their fold]. But Hinduism ? A non-Hindu can never become a Hindu even after never-ending penance. . . Hindu dharma, Father! Such hatred, such self-pride, such anger towards Muslims . . . You talk of repentance, Father. Yes, I will do penance, but not for becoming a Muslim — because one day I was a Hindu and that's what I'repent."[22].

Mewar Patan tells of the downfall not only of Mewar but of Hindus, and of loss of 'national' character. In *Durgadas* (1905), the might of the Marathas and their horsemanship is praised, and the hope is expressed that they would join the Rajputs against the Mughals; if united, they would be a formidable force to reckon with. *Shahjahan* (1909) sheds light on the inability of the Rajput princes to unite against the Mughals; even if they were successful, the play suggests, there would be a struggle for supremacy among the Rajput chieftains themselves. D.L. Roy's characters were taken from epic lore as well, like Rama in the play *Seeta* (1902) or Ahalya in *Pashani* (1900); but even these became real people, with human faces and contemporary problems.

Padmini (1903), *Nandakumar* (1904), *Palashir Prayashchitta* (1901), *Banger Pratapaditya* (1906) and *Alamgir* (1921), all written by Kshirodeprasad Vidyavinode, related religion to nationalism in one way or other. Interestingly, he wrote plays on two of Girish Ghosh's earlier subjects — Siraj-ud-doula and Mir Kasim — characters who had gained mythical proportions in popular consciousness.

Some of these plays afford dual interpretations. Plays glorifying a 'Hindu' past can also be read as documents on patriotism of a secular kind, with Hindu-Muslim unity at the forefront. Indeed the partition of Bengal saw dichotomous streams of thinking. On the one hand, the militancy was stridently Hindu in character; on the other, Muslims were a large part of the population, and assimilating them into the mainstream was a compulsion. In the political arena, the two communities were often openly antagonistic. Yet secular language was used when Girish Ghosh had Siraj declare :

> Should there be a blessed day when Hindus and Muslims unite for the cause of the motherland, give up their selfish interests and shoulder the common exploited man's cause, and feel their insult as their personal humiliation, only then can the foreigners be tamed, or else unfortunate Mother Bengal is bound to be in chains[23].

Similarly, while the play *Chhatrapati Shivaji* clearly expressed Hindu sentiments and promoted the cult of the Mother Goddess, there was evidently a dilemma in dealing with Muslim characters. In an almost forced bid for communal harmony, Shivaji tells the Muslims

that they are free in an independent Maharashtra: "He who loves freedom does not discriminate between a Hindu and a Muslim. The discrimination is in the hearts of cowards. It is they who perpetuate it."[24] He tells Muslims who want to join his army:

> . . . you too are entitled to freedom. You will take up arms for freedom, there is no doubt about it, and brighten the face of the motherland. There will be no discrimination against you on the basis of race or religion[25].

One should be wary of reading these plays as historical plays, because the concern of the playwrights was not historicity; rather, it was using history to promote nationalism. In this effort Girish Ghosh, with his fairly good sense of history, was very successful in his later phase. He moulded the Bengali stage on nationalist lines and indeed tried to turn it into an institution for nation-building. When *Chhatrapati Shivaji* was staged on 9 June 1905, *The Bengalee* announced on behalf of Minerva Theatre:

> We beg to draw the attention of the reader to the announcement made elsewhere that Messrs Tilak and Khaparde will attend the performance at the Minerva Theatre this evening . . . In honour of the venerable Moharashtra Patrons Srijut Balagangadhar Tilak of Poona, Sri Krishan Khaparde of Amraoti, [and] Dr. Munje of Nagpore . . . other distinguished guests and renowned visitors have kindly consented to grace our pavillion with their presence.

During the performance of *Shivaji* the 'Bande Mataram' slogan was raised; Girish Ghosh playing a role in the play knelt down in respectful acknowledgement, while the whole house stood up in silence. Tilak sat through the entire play and congratulated the dramatist and the theatre for putting up such a patriotic play.[26]

D.L. Roy's plays *Rana Pratapsingha*, *Durgadas*, *Noorjehan*, and *Shahjahan* all deal with Hindu-Muslim unity. In *Rana Pratapasingha*, Mehrunissa asks her father Akbar if God is one; and if that is so, why is so much blood spilled in His name. She and Ira, Pratapsingha's daughter, are bosom friends, though their fathers are enemies. In *Durgadas*, the military commander of Aurangzeb's force, Diler Khan, tries his utmost to forge communal harmony. He says:

> Why can't it happen. . . both have lived under the same sky and breathed the same air. Are their souls not one even now? Let them for once forget their religious differences, racial differences, and with folded hands bow to the green and prosperous land that is India.[27]

In *Noorjehan*, a visibly worried Shahjahan asks Karnasingha of Mewar whether his precious Taj Mahal would be preserved after his death. Karnasingha valiantly replies: "It is true that Hindus have fallen, but not so low, O Emperor. As long as there is someone to light a lamp in the Mewar dynasty, there will be no dearth of oil to light a lamp in the Masjid as well."[28] D.L. Roy made a serious effort to bring awareness to the people, to overcome religious differences, and unite them for a common cause. He also tried to bring out the humanism of religion, and made deft use of history to drive his points home. *Chandragupta* (1911) reflected D.L. Roy's pride in being an Indian. When the Indian king Porus is asked by Alexander how he would like to be treated, he replies with great aplomb: "As one king treats

another". The playwright was one of the few to state that nationalism was not enough; what was needed was humility and regeneration of national character. In *Mewar Patan*, he probably sums up his own thoughts in a dialogue by Manashi, a noble Rajput lady: "Patriotism is greater than self, but [humanhood] is greater than patriotism."[29] In fact, he even saw bitter justice in the partition of Bengal: "Until many of our social practices are abolished and we learn to be civilized, we cannot think of being politically one."[30] In all his patriotic plays, there is a clear appeal to social responsibility and humanity—even in the aftermath of the partition: "*Giechhe desh dukkha/nei, Ebar tora manush ho.*"[31] ('No matter if you've lost your land / Grow up now, be human.')

Nationalism is again the subject matter of Kshirodeprasad Vidyavinode's *Palashir Prayashchitta*. In this play, Mir Kasim says: "It's easy to defeat Bengal's enemies and traitors, those who have eaten off her hand, gathered strength and stabbed her . . . I do not know of any man in the world stronger than, who can get rid of these traitors to the motherland."[32] Kshirodeprasad has dealt with Siraj-ud-doula and Mir Kasim emotionally rather than historically. Mir Kasim is repentant about his criticism of Siraj and eventually gives up all his wealth to stand with the poor. The actor Durgadas who played the role, though old and ill when the play was produced, was known for his occasional brilliant performances, thrilling his audiences.[33]

Pratapaditya was staged at the Star on 15 August 1903. It created a sensation among people, and the *Englishman* wanted the government to take special measures against the play as its ideas were deemed dangerous. The Star, however, hit upon a novel idea of placating the government by introducing a 'Goddess of England' in the scene where Pratap, the hero, was taken in chains. The ploy worked, and Kshirodeprasad's intention of creating a nationalist hero in Pratap was accomplished.[34]

Two of Kshirodeprasad's plays, based on history but with his own emotional overtones, were *Nandakumar* and *Banglar Masnad*. In the first play, the hero Nandakumar is tried unfairly by the British and hanged, making him a martyr[35]. In *Banglar Masnad*, Sarfaraz, a *darbesh* (holy man), is similarly made a hero, despite his vices[36].

Girish Ghosh's *Mahapuja*, which he wrote as early as in 1890, was clearly influenced by the resolutions passed in the Calcutta session of the Congress that year — especially the demand for representation in government. In the second scene of the play, a citizen says: "We are as well educated, if not better, than the British. Can we not . . . represent the people? Will there never be a parliament in India as in Britain?" In fact, the play was produced at the Congress session in Calcutta under the presidentship of Ferozeshah Mehta, and was widely applauded. This play had many actresses: Manada appeared as Britannica, Banabiharini as Bharat Mata, Tarasundari as Saraswati, and Nagendrabala as Lakshmi.[37]

Girish Ghosh shared Rabindranath's views about Boycott — that the poorer sections of the people would be badly affected if it were forced on them. However, in *Mir Kasim*, the Nawab of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa appears as a spokesman for Swadeshi, opposing the British on economic issues. The play deals principally with economic conflict—the banditry practised by English merchants in India, leading to its ruination. This is used as an example of captialist aggression. In this play, the capitalist principle of reducing everything to merchandise, including the throne of Bengal, is referred to by Ali Ibrahim in his

warning to the Nawab:

> Today Holwell will sell you the throne because he is greedy for money, tomorrow someone else will replace him, and, equally greedy, he will sell the throne to someone else. The throne of Bengal will become the new merchandise of the English.[38]

The figure of the tramp in the play underscores the horror of the devastation caused by British economic policies in this country. This man has gone mad, dressed himself in cast-away European clothes, and walks among the ruins of weavers' cottages in Rajshahi scattering dry leaves and muttering: "Here's your advance, I need a hundred maunds of tobacco tomorrow morning. There, now fifty lashes to the weaver!" When people laugh and throw stones at him, he scowls and threatens: "Wait till I send my report to England!"[39] This little scene shows a country maddened by deprivation.

In both *Siraj-ud-doula* and *Mir Kasim* the religious divide, the lack of patriotism, and near-civil-war conditions are all reflected appropriately. One of the greatest qualities of this playwright was his perception of a 'national theatre', which he believed could be created if urban and rural culture were to be integrated. Jatra would then have to be urbanized, and the city theatre would go to the villages. A good performer would be one who could move easily from one form to the other and deliver relevant messages.

Kshirodeprasad's *Dada o Didi* (1904) raised a number of contemporary issues. It was a play about the economic decline of India, and the near-famine conditions in the country. It focused on the newly acquired drinking habit of the youth, the racial arrogance of the British, and the Ilbert Bill controversy which did not allow Indians to try the British in court.

As early as 1890 Girish Ghosh had written a play, *Chando*, which was promptly banned by the British. This was only vaguely based on Rajasthan history, and is actually Girish's manifesto for violent political revolution. Details of history have been deliberately scuttled here to free the play of all local colour, and make it representative of any country where despotism reigns. This play was written even before Swami Vivekananda developed his philosophy of militant nationalism. In similar vein, Kshirodeprasad Vidyavinode's *Padmini* invokes the motherland, but the dramatist's thoughts are with the militants who worshipped the land as the Mother Goddess. Rahim in this play says: "The motherland is not the king's alone. To protect it is the right of both king and commoners. Citizens should sacrifice their lives for the country with a smile."[40]

Swadeshi songs full of passion have a special place in the history of this era. Apart from songs written exclusively for the movement, many songs in the plays of the period became popular outside the theatre, and are well known even today. These songs were often of past glory and present degeneration, and sometimes invoked the Mother Goddess in their call to the service of land. Girish's *Mahapuja* had two very popular songs: '*Nayana jale genthe mala porabo dukhini maye*' ('I will string a garland of tears and lay it on my saddened mother'); and '*Sonar Bangla*' ('My golden Bengal'). For *Jaise ko Taisa* (1904), enacted in Minerva Theatre, he wrote songs about women giving up foreign clothes and breaking their glass bangles to wear traditional bangles made of conch-shells: '*Ekhon cholchhe sari shankhar ador bari bari*'.[41] D.L. Roy was famous for the patriotic songs in his plays. The

patriotic songs in *Shahjahan*, '*Dhana dhanye pushpe bhara*' ('Land of riches, fruit and flower'), was on everyone's lips — an ode to the motherland. Other songs such as '*Dhao dhao samara kshetre*' ('Hasten to the battleground'), '*Jedin sunil jaladhi hoite*' ('Arising from the blue ocean') and '*Bharat amar*' ('My Bharat') were also sources of inspiration and fellow feeling. In *Pratapsingha*, the hero Rana Pratap laments that his motherland is in chains, and speaks of how he would free her and adorn her with jewels. '*Dhao dhao*' is sung before the soldiers of Mewar go out to war:

Dhao dhao samara kshetre
Gao uchche ranajay gatha
Raksha korite pirita dharma
Shuno ei dake Bharat Mata

Make haste to the battleground
Sing loud your song of victory
Hark to the call of Bharat Mata
To save our imperilled dharma[42]

Some Muslims objected to some statements in D.L. Roy's plays. The government was quick to take advantage of these objections and issue an order:

> The plays are not seditious but tend to promote hatred between Hindus and Mohammadens and fall within section 153 of The Indian Penal Code and Press Act. *Pratapsingha, Mewar Patan* and *Durgadas* have been written by Mr. D.L.Roy, a Deputy Magistrate, and it is improbable that he intended by these writings to put class against class. It will probably be sufficient to tell the author to withdraw the books from circulation and to direct the police to prohibit the performances of the plays in Bengal and East Bengal districts.[43]

Dada o Didi, Siraj-ud-doula, Mir Kasim, Chhatrapati Shivaji, were all proscribed under the Dramatic Performances Act during this period. It is said that Girish Ghosh had started writing a play on the Rani of Jhansi, but before he could complete it, he was warned by the police not to do so.[44] Kshirodeprasad's *Pratapaditya* was also declared to be dangerous material but, as mentioned earlier, was saved by a ploy.

The proscenium stage was only for urban audiences. In the villages and mofussil towns, the traditional open-air performances of Jatra and Kathakatha were much more important, and were fully exploited during the Swadeshi movement. In Barisal, Ashwini Kumar Dutt inspired Hemchandra Kaviratna to compose Kathakathas of a new kind, mixing patriotic ideas with traditional stories taken from the epics or religious texts. In Jatra the famous name was Jogeshwar De, better know as Mukundadas (1878 – 1934). With him Jatra became something of a substitute for Swadeshi meetings — it reached a mass audience of all classes, and succeeded in spreading political awareness. The Jatra was something like a morality play, pitting good against evil in black and white. During the Swadeshi period the Englishman became the new figure of evil and the Indian revolutionary that of good.

Mukundadas spread the nationalist message through the Jatra, and went to prison a number of times under the British laws of sedition. He roamed the villages with Swadeshi songs and his messsage of *Matri-puja*. Taking a cue from the theatre, he created *Jatra-palas*

(plays) strongly commenting on the government and the ruling class. His songs became immensely popular and are practically part of Bengali folklore today. He was not a great singer, but his presentation and appeal to people's sentiment was extraordinary. It is said that often Ashwini Kumar Dutt and Jagadish Mukhopadhyay set his lyrics to music. Ashwini Kumar Dutt had written many inspiring Swadeshi songs himself, and was actively helped by the dramatist and song-writer Hemchandra Mukherjee, who was originally a *kathak* (i.e., a practitioner of Kathakatha).

Numerous Jatras were performed by Mukundadas: *Shadhan-Sangeet*, *Palliseba*, *Brahmacharini*, *Path*, *Sathi*, *Karmakhetra*, *Samaj*, etc. Ultimately, Mukundadas was sentenced to three years' rigorous imprisonment in 1908, and a fine of three hundred rupees was imposed on him for a song he sang:

Chilo dhan gola bhora
Shwet indure korlo sara

The granary was full of paddy
The white mice ate it all[45]

'White' here obviously indicates the British. As Mukundadas's financial situation deteriorated, he had to sell his shop for his vocation as dramatist, but he was a much-admired man, and many people came to his aid. He was a committed secularist. A multi-faceted personality, Mukundadas wrote for a periodical called *Barisal Hitoishi* on a regular basis. A song often sung by him in his Jatras, written by Manamohan Chakravorty, spread like wildfire:

Chhere dao reshmi churi, Banganari,
Kobhu hate ar porona[46]

Discard those silken bangles, O women of Bengal,
Never wear them again

A few translations of his songs would be necessary here to illustrate how he politicized the Jatra form so successfully:

Tora peter jogar kar
Tora bhater jogar kar
Maner gorae chhai dhele
Aj koshe langol dhar.[47]

Work for your bread
Give up your false pride
And grasp the plough
With all your strength

Matripuja Jatra was written by Bhushandas, Mukundadas's brother, and was staged in Faridpur, Idilpur, Chandpur and other places. Bhushandas was a good singer, and the play was performed for the Calcutta session of the Congress in 1906; thereafter, it was performed for eighteen nights in the city. *Matripuja* was a purely political play in the guise of a puranic

tale. The main character was Surendra, the king of music among the gods. The allusion was obviously to Surendranath Banerjee, the vociferous anti-partition leader. The battle between the gods and the demons was again an allegory for the fight of the patriots against the invaders, the British. It is reported that, inspired by this Jatra, villagers in Chittagong district formed an amateur theatrical company and performed a series of anti-British plays. Mukundadas extensively toured nearly all the districts of Bengal. His visit to Noakhali in March 1907 had an impact on the largely Muslim population, and his songs became very popular there:

Ram Rahim na juda karo
Monta khanti rakhoji
Desher katha bhab bhaire
Desh amader Mataji[48]

Don't keep apart Ram and Rahim
Keep your minds pure
Brothers, think about the country
The country is our mother

The government was so worried about his activities that, apart from police interference, the Magistrate of Dacca ordered Mukundadas to leave his district, and even paid for the cost of the Jatra company's journey back to Bakarganj. This was after the performance of *Samaj* at Dhakeshwari Cotton Mills, Bangla Bazar. Mukundadas's understanding of the state of India's economy was very good, and this was seen in the palas in which he sang about reconstruction of industry. One is tempted to translate one of his famous songs to illustrate the point[49]:

Let's walk on our own,
Why do we need a stick?
When we have enough for our needs,
Why indulge in foreign goods?
Plain cloth and plain rice,
Won't that do for us?
Sugar and flour from foreign mills,
Do we need all that?
Molasses and hand-ground flour,
We'll have with great relish.
Leave alone foreign cloth,
Let the country's weavers live.
When you have copper vessels,
Why go for iron ones?
Leave your silken bangles,
Don't we have conchshell ones?
Hear what Mukundadas has to say,
Everything will be in a better way[50]

In the middle of one of his performances Mukundadas received a letter from Rabindranath Tagore praising him for his Jatra at Jorasanko, the residence of the Tagores. Addressing

Mukundadas as *santan*, son of the soil, Rabindranath had on that occasion asked the singer to sing one of his (Rabindranath's) own songs:[51]

Bidhir bandhan katbe tumi, emon shaktiman.

Are you indeed so powerful that you think you can change the writ of destiny?

Another song of Tagore which Mukundadas sang[52] was:

Banglar mati, Banglar jal
Banglar bayu, Banglar phal
Punno hok, punno hok, punno hok, he bhagaban

The soil of Bengal, its water
Its air, its fruits
Bless it all, O Lord

In 1921, at the Pradeshik Congress meeting at Barisal, he sang Rabindranath Tagore's famous song[53]:

Jodi tor dak shune keu na ashe,
Tobe ekla chalo re . . .

If no one hears your call
Then walk alone

Ashutosh Mukherjee presented Mukundadas with a walking stick[54], on which was inscribed:

Je rakhe amay, tar hoy na bipod
Mukunder sakha ami, murkher oushodh

One who keeps me is freed of danger
I am Mukundadas's friend, a cure for fools

Kazi Nazrul Islam felicitated Mukundadas on one occasion and had him sing two of his own songs[55]:

Ghor ghor re amar shadher charka ghor

Spin, spin, favourite spinning wheel of mine

and

Jater name bajjati shob
Jat jaliyat khelche jua

such skulduggery in the name of religion
Such fraud and gamble by those with high stakes

C.R. Das presented Mukundadas with a watch[56]. At the Calcutta University Institute, where he sang for women and exhorted them to join the struggle, Priyamvada Devi presented him a golden safety pin. It is said that Acharya Jagadish Chandra Basu, the scientist, was among his keen listeners[57].

The Governor of Bengal, Bamfield Fuller, was very apprehensive of Mukundadas's seditious activities. Though it may sound melodramatic, it is a fact that when Mukundadas was being taken away to prison by Fuller's orders, he sang this song[58]:

Fuller, ar ki dekhao bhoi?
Deho amar odhin bote
Mon to odhin noi

How can you scare me, Fuller?
My body may be subservient to you,
But my mind is free.

Long after the Swadeshi upsurge, Mukundadas's songs were heard during the non-cooperation movements of 1922 and 1930 in Bengal.

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The cultural nationalists of Bengal faced an agonizing choice as politics entered a militant phase after 1905. They were more in sympathy with moderate politics. Rabindranath Tagore is a case in point. He had spoken out against government repression, but found it hard to accept terrorism. And yet his admiration for the heroism of the terrorists was evident. The revolutionaries were single-minded about overthrowing the British, but they seldom questioned Western cultural dominance in the way the cultural nationalists did. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Raj welcomed Swadeshi art, the unthreatening face of nationalism, as an antidote to armed revolution. The irony of the situation can be appreciated when we learn that young martyrs often went to the gallows singing snatches of a Tagore song.

Rabindranath's nationalism was not narrow in its implications:. It was not his intention to ignite a shortlived nationalist conflagration using the closest and most convenient historical circumstances; his revolution had to be lasting in impact. Rabindranath's plays on the Swadeshi theme are not many; however, his nationalist discourse in literature, his ideas of *atmashakti* and *swadeshi samaj* had far-reaching effects.

Differences between the extremists and moderates sent Rabindranath back to Santiniketan, for he was completely opposed to violent subversive activities and the politics of assassination. In his approach one finds a message of non-violence which the Mahatma put before the nation a few years later. It was during these turbulent times that he wrote the song *'Amar sonar Bangla, ami tomay bhalobashi'*, which, by an irony of the Muses, was to become the national anthem of the state of Bangladesh — the East Bengal province of the day.

Tagore's deep involvement with the anti-partition movement was unquestionable, as was his patriotism. In his *'Swadeshi Samaj'* address he analysed the grassroot problems of a truly Indian social polity. His poem on Shivaji (1904) was an eloquent expression of patriotism. His essay *'Abastha o Byabastha'* ('The Situation and the Remedy') was an intelligent critique of society and politics. But gradually, as he began to look beyond national horizons and the urgencies of politics, Tagore's loyalty to the nation became suspect in the eyes of some observers. His view that the traditional samaj was the real centre of Indian life, and not the state, was criticized as romantic.

Tagore is said to have had a revulsion for what he thought was the cheapness and

vulgarity of the professional theatre. In the bargain, he cut himself off from the robust response of a mass audience, which his critics say is the reason for the purely abstract quality of his plays,. This also strengthened suspicion about the stageworthiness of his plays. Whether or not there is merit in this criticism, there can be no doubt about the subtle political comment in many of Tagore's plays. Indeed, some of them were political in inspiration. Looking at some of his works — *Gora* (dramatized in 1936), *Ghare Baire* (1916), *Bou Thakuranir Haat* (dramatized as *Prayashchitta* in 1909), *Rajarshi* (1887), his essay on 'Nationalism' (1917) — Rabindranath's political message seems clear. There is an inbuilt critique of nationalism in these works and a refusal to recognize the nation-state as the organizing principle of Indian civilization and as the last word in the country's political life. Tagore was a patriot, but an unmistakable humanist and internationalist. He portrayed in some of his works the corruption of power brought about by narrow nationalism. This made way for political debate over the methods of the Swadeshi movement and social reform in general.

By 1907 Tagore was already modifying his political viewpoint, which can be best illustrated by referring to *Gora*. The work is full of references to the social and political conflicts which stirred the minds of the common people of Bengal. *Gora* seems to be Rabindranath's critique of the swadeshi samaj, a samaj he had believed in, only to find beneath the surface the ugly reality of obscurantism stifling human initiative, setting apart caste from caste, Hindus from Muslims. The vision of an India united on a modern, egalitarian basis, transcending all these barriers, inspired the last pages of the book.

Gora, Tagore's hero in the novel (and play), is an ultra-Hindu. He is not apologetic about being oriented to the past and stoutly defends the caste-ridden, superstitious, idolatrous society of Hindu India. Gora's Irish parentage is unknown to him. And when Gora discovers this, we have the ultimate symbolic proof that the concept of national identity Gora had upheld is itself exogenous, and violates the fundamental principles of Indianness and Hinduism. It is as if a self overly well-defined and exclusive cannot by definition be an authentic Indian self, capable of interactions with other Indians.

Other plays of the period with some amount of political content include Amarendranath Datta's *Banger Angachhed* (1905), which contains a reference to students taking the Swadeshi vow, but is otherwise rather old-fashioned and even mendicant in its outlook. The play ends with an eulogy of Edward VII, and a prayer to him to rescind the partition. Very moderate likewise in approach, *Jagaran* by Haranath Bose (1905) describes the social boycott of an anti-Swadeshi zamindar and his alienation. By far the most interesting play of this period is *Shabash Bangali* by Amritalal Basu staged for the first time in December 1905. The issues in the play are all contemporary issues, so analysing it has been an interesting task for students of Bengali drama. The play opens with a chorus of women exhorting their menfolk to return to the ways of the 'true' Bengali. Some of the scenes that follow are cited here as illustrative vignettes: A couple, Nayanchand and Garabini, worry about their son's marriage prospects now that the 'market value' of a university degree is falling sharply. Aghorenath, the head clerk of a British firm, and his wife listen to a Swadeshi lecture by their student son who has just been released from jail. Student picketers pursue an anglicized lady, who turns out to be their professor's wife, to make her give up her foreign purchases and make a bonfire of them. Jerkins, an Anglo-Indian torn by conflicting loyalties, is portrayed with unusual sophistica-

tion. There is also a zamindar doing a little tightrope-walking, eager for a title, and yet eventually giving some money secretly for Swadeshi; a shopkeeper merrily making a profit in Swadeshi goods — a very real problem in those days; a drunkard who makes what is for him the supreme sacrifice, giving up foreign liquor, and a corrupt policeman concocting a Swadeshi case by instigating the drunkard to shout 'Bande Mataram'. On the streets, cobblers, washerwomen and hawkers all sing determinedly not to touch or sell foreign goods. Fashionable ladies abandon foreign powder and perfume, and go for indigenous products which their husbands now prefer. The play ends on a Gandhian note, with women going back to the charkha.

By the very vividness of its reflection of reality, *Shabash Bangali* reveals some of the limitations of the movement. Aghorenath's wife is indignant particularly because a constable, who after all belongs to a lower class, has dared to lay his plebeian hand on her darling son. Pashdanga village in the play never becomes quite as real as its scenes of Calcutta life. Abdul Sobhan, the Swadeshi Muslim, fails to convince when he declares that Hindus are his elder brothers. (Indeed, why should he accept a junior rank?) Most revealing of all — no peasant appears on the stage, the village movement being represented by schoolboys led by their patriotic headmaster. Many of the issues of Swadeshi embodied middle-class hopes and not the reality of the masses.

From 1908 onwards, the government speeded up its repressive measures against allegedly seditious plays. Kunjabihari Ganguly was prosecuted under Section 124 A for his *Matripuja,* which had been performed at many places in Calcutta during 1907 and was published in 1908. This was a Puranic allegory showing the revolt of the *devas* (gods) against the *daityas* (demons) ruling them. The former have as their leaders Surendra, Tilak, Bipin, Rabi and Ashwini Kumar, while the demon king is a good-hearted man misled by the wicked minister Krurajan. The names of all the devas are noticeably those of the national leaders of the time and the asuras as usual represent of the British. By January 1911 thirteen more plays had been banned.

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The struggle against the partition of Bengal brought out the best and worst in Bengal's political radicalism. It placed Bengal at the forefront of India's political struggle, recording the first retreat of the imperial power on a political issue. The partition of Bengal was revoked in 1911, and the British moved their capital from Calcutta to Delhi the same year. This made Gokhale declare what Bengalis have never allowed themselves to forget: "What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow."

However, despite the talk about mass awakening, the Swadeshi movement did not really reach out to the masses of Bengal. It was mainly confined to Hindu upper-caste bhadralok society with its rentier interests in land. Zamindars and their intermediaries were often part of the Swadeshi bandwagon. The main centres of the upsurge were also places with large concentrations of Hindu gentry[59]. Thus the peasant seldom, if ever, appears in Swadeshi plays. In *Shabash Bangali,* as noted earlier, the village movement takes place with no peasant participation. The volunteers in Mukundadas's a Jatra *Palli Seva* declare that they all

have some land, and hence do not worry about "mere rice and dal", again pointing to the middle/upper-caste base of Swadeshi, and the absence of support from the peasantry[60]. Police statistics about Samiti members in Bakarganj, for example, clearly identify them as intermediate tenure holders. (In Sarupkhati police station of Bakarganj "nearly half the voluneeters [were] talukdars, that is to say, persons with a tenure-holding interest in land"[61].) The tillers of the land are missing from the picture.

A few Calcutta lawyers with nationalist affiliations did develop an interest in labour movements, and Ashwini Kumar Dutt's Swadesh Bandhab Samiti did briefly acquire some kind of mass base in the villages of Barisal through sustained humanitarian and constructive work. Yet popular participation in the movement was meagre, particularly in comparison with the non-cooperation and Khilafat movements. The strikes which were organized, or the unions that were formed, were mainly of white-collar employees of printing presses, the railways, or of Bengali workers in the jute mills. The plantations and mines were entirely unaffected, and with the exception of a hartal on 16 October 1905, there was no instance of a political strike. Despite the pressures of caste, religion and class exerted by the Hindu gentry to enforce the Boycott in the countryside, the worker and the peasant refused to be involved in the movement. And when the partition was revoked in 1911, it was mainly owing to the elitist pressure on the government.

The Swadeshi years introduced Hindu nationalistic themes into the political discourse of the bhadralok of Bengal — a tripartite framework of ancient Hindu glory, medieval Muslim tyranny and decline, and modern reawakening. The samaj (community or society) came to be counterposed to rashtra or *rajshakti* (the state, and the power of the state). The real history of India, it was repeatedly asserted, was located in the samaj which embodied the distinctive genius and culture of the Indian people. On the positive side, some concrete effort was made at village reconstruction, promoting elementary education, higher education, and cottage crafts. Invaluable collections of folk literature, songs, and fairy tales were put together. Regional and local histories were recorded by historians, and pioneering surveys of Bengali language and literature were undertaken by a new breed of literary scholars.

As regards the women's question, Swadeshi was mainly a male domain. Women were expected to applaud from the sidelines, persuade husbands to abandon 'denationalized' ways, but not directly participate in political activities. A leading nationalist weekly, *Sanjibani*, stated on 12 October 1905 that gender segregation had to be maintained even while exchanging rakhis, a ritual used by the movement to create mass solidarity. Swadeshi cultural nationalism exalted woman as an abstract mother figure, Bangalakshmi, a bountiful bestower of good fortune to the land of Bengal. This often went with a fairly aggressive reassertion of patriarchal values, and hostility towards what an earlier generation of middle-class reformers had called *stri-swadhinata*, freedom of women.

Likewise, on the communal question, Swadeshi remained conservative, and indeed alienated the Muslim masses by its resort to religious imagery for popular support. The poverty and deprivation of both the Hindu and Muslim masses could have been used to create a new secular discourse, but this did not come about. In some East Bengal districts with a predominantly Hindu gentry and an overwhelmingly Muslim tenantry, efforts to enforce the boycott of foreign goods through a combination of Hindu religious appeal and zamindari pressure

contributed to communal riots in 1906 – 1907. (This is, in part, reflected in Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Ghare-baire*, and captured in powerful cinematic imagery by Satyajit Ray in his film based on the novel.) Making nationalism synonymous with Hindutva was a form of elite communalism, and since for both the communities territoriality remained important, Bengal was inevitably partitioned again in 1947.

Essentially, what has remained as an abiding legacy of the Swadeshi years in Bengal, is a rich crop of plays and songs, literature and painting — richer indeed than any produced by later phases of nationalism in this part of the country. The patriotic songs composed during those years have remained a source of inspiration and are part of modern Bengal's musical inheritance. There were besides numerous essays on Swadeshi themes, a large number of plays, outstanding novels directly connected to contemporary debates, a new interest in literacy, local history and folk culture, and a patriotic school of fine arts gathered around Abanindranath Tagore. Actually, the arts during the Swadeshi years were employed to construct a political and cultural ideology, and commented back on that ideology, in a manner that was not immediately apparent.

We are not done with Swadeshi yet, in Bengal or the rest of India. The word is back in our political parlance, though with a changed content. But that is another story, and not set forth in song or drama.

NOTES

1. Susie Tharu, 'Thinking the Nation out : Some Reflections on Nationalism Theory' *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 17-18, 1989, p. 82.

2. Minto Papers cited in Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*. New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1973, p. 526.

3. Amales Tripathi, *The Extremist Challenge*. Calcutta: Orient Longmans, 1967, p. 86.

4. Report of the 19th INC, Madras (1903). Govt of India publication. p. 131.

5. Report of the 20th INC, Bombay (1904). Govt of India publication, p. 222.

6. Daniel Argov, *Moderates and Extremists in the Nationalist Movement*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1967, p.109.

7. This song became the national anthem of Bangladesh which came into existence sixty-seven years later.

8. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. III, Calcutta: Rama Krishna Mission Publication, p. 302.

9. Jyotirindranath Tagore and Anandamohan Bose started shipping companies and banks. Rabindranath's Swadeshi Bhandar had already opened at Harrison Road as early as 1897. Jogeshchandra Chowdhury started the Indian Stores in 1901. Swadeshi stores were started under the Dawn Society (1902 - 1907). Kedarnath Dasgupta and Sarala Debi's Lakshmi Bhandar was started in 1903. The College Street Chatra Bhandar was actively associated with politics. Bengal Chemicals was founded in 1893.

10. Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1973, p. 92.

11. Revolutionary terrorism started as early as 1902 with the formation of some groups: *the Midnapur Secret Society* started by Jnanendranath Basu, Sarala Ghoshal's *Gymnasium, the Atmonnati Samiti* set up under Nibaran Bhattacharya, Indranath Nandi, Bipinbihari Ganguly and Probhaschandra Dey.

12. Tripathi, op cit., p.1.

13. *Sri Aurobindor Bangla Rachana*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1994, pp.340-341.

14. The leading Muslim personalities in the struggle were Maulavi Mohammad Yusuf Khan, barrister Abdul Rasool, barrister Sayeed Motahar Hussain, Liaquat Hussain, Dedar Bux, Deen Mohammed Gafar, Ismail Siraji Hussain, Abdul Hussain, Khan Bahadur and Kasim Halim Ghaznavi.

15. The main playwrights of the time were Girish Ghosh (1877 - 1912) Amritalal Basu (1875-1928), Dwijendra Lal Roy (1895 - 1913), Kshirodeprasad Vidyavinode (1894 - 1926), Mukundadas (1878-1934), and Amarendra Nath Dutta (1876 - 1916).

16. Samik Bandyopadhyay, 'Editorial', *Rangavarta*, No. 58, December 1995.

17. S. Mukherjee, op cit., p. 78

18. Others who followed were Rajani Kanta Sen, Kaliprasanna Kabyabisharad, Satyendranath Datta, Kartikchandra Dasgupta, Bijaychandra Mazumdar, Kamini Kumar Bhattacharya, Girindramohini Dasi, Syed Abu Mohammad and Ismail Hussain Shirazi.

19. The Suhrid Samiti of Mymensingh brought out a volume on Swadeshi pallisangeet. Bankura was famous for *bhadu* songs. Mofizuddin Bayati composed Swadeshi songs in the village dialect of Barisal. Kaliprasanna Kabyabisharad opened and closed Swadeshi meetings with patriotic songs. Ramakanta Roy and Liakat Husain used songs for their processions. Brajendralal Ganguli was a noted singer and political agitator.

20. Utpal Dutt, *Girish Manas*, Calcutta: M.C. Sircar & Sons Ltd., 1983, p. 47.

21. H.N.Dasgupta, *Indian Stage*, Vol. IV, New Delhi: Gian Publishers, pp. 39-40.

22. D.L. Roy, *Mewar Patan*, Act III, Scene IV, *Dwijendra Rachanabali*, Vol.1, ed. Rathindra Roy, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, p. 326.

23. Girish Ghosh *Siraj-ud-doula*, Act 1. Scene V, *Girish Rachanabali*, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1969, p 562.

24. Girish Ghosh, *Chhatrapati Shivaji*, Act 1, Scene 6, *Girish Rachanabali* Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1969, p 364.

25. Ibid.

26. Actor Aparesh Chandra Mukherjee recollects the scene personally in his book *Rangalayer Trish Bachchar*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 1991, p. 92.

27. D.L. Roy, *Durgadas*, Act IV, Scene 8, *Dwijendra Rachanabali*, Vol.1, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, p. 297.

28. Rathindra Roy, ed., D.L.Roy's, *Noorjehan*, Act V, Scene VII, Vol.II, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1954, p. 216.

29. Kironmoy Raha, *Bengali Theatre*, New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1978, p. 80.

30. Prabhat Kumar Goswami, *Uttar Challisher Rajnaitik Natak*, Calcutta: Sanskrit Parishad, 1982, p. 22.

31. Ibid, p. 22.

32. *Kshirode Granthabali, Palashir Prayashchitta*, Act 3, Scene 4, Calcutta: Basumati Sahitya Mandir, BS 1324, p. 194.

33. Dasgupta, Op cit., p.159

34. Ibid, Vol.V, p. 156.

35. R.C. Mazumdar in his book *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, thinks otherwise, and comments on the justification of putting an end to Nanda Kumar's life.

36. Jadunath Sircar in *History of Bengal*,says that Sarfaraz had to lose his kingship due to sheer inefficiency.

37. Sushil Mukherjee, op cit, p. 74.

38. Utpal Dutt, *Girish Chandra Ghosh*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1992, p. 75.

39. Ibid.

40. *Kshirodeprasad Granthabali, Padmini*, Act 5, Scene II, p. 68.

41. Girish Ghosh, *Jaise Ko Taisa*, Act I, Scene 8, *Girish Rachanabali*, Vol. I, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1969, p. 721.

42. D.L. Roy's '*Malin Mukhochandra Ma Bharat Tomar*' and Rabindranath's '*Oi Bhubanamonomohini*' were used by Amritalal Basu in *Hirak Churna* and *Nabajiban*. Jyotirindranath Thakur and his brother Rabindranaths 'Jala Jala Chita ...'and Satyendranath Thakur's '*Mile Shobe Bharat Santan*' were used in Basu's play *Bharat Mata*. Manmatha Ray's *Karagar* had songs written by Kazi Nazrul Islam. Plays like *Akash Kusum, Surendra Binodini, Chanda, Sarat Sarojini, Bange Bargi* and *Anandamath* also had inspiring songs.

43. Sisir Kar, *British Shashone Bajeapto Bangla Boi*, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers 1988, p. 230.

44. Shubir Roychowdhury, *Biliti Jatra theke Swadeshi Theatre*, Calcutta: Jadavpur University, 1971 p. 431.

45. Kalipada Das and Suresh Chandra Das, ed. and pub, *Mukunda Das Geetabali Sangraha*, Calcutta: p.p. 39-40.

46. *Mukunda Dasher Granthabali*, Calcutta: Basumati Sahitya Mandir, nd, p. 46.

47. Ibid, p. 21.

48. Kumaresh Ghosh, *Charan Kabi Mukundadas*, Calcutta: Grantha Griha, 1981, p. 82.

49. Since the Bengali version is lengthy, only an English translation is reproduced here.

50. Ghosh, op cit., p. 67.

51. Satiswar Mukherjee, *Charan Kabi Mukundadas*, Calcutta: Lipika, BS 1379, p. 43.

52. Ghosh, op cit, p. 47.

53. Joy Guru Goswami, *Charan Kabi Mukundadas*, Calcutta: Visvavani Prakashan, 1972, p. 57. This was a favourite song of Mahatma Gandhi as well.

54. Mukherjee, Op cit, p. 43.

55. Ghosh, op cit, p. 108.

56. Ibid, p. 43.

57. Ibid, p. 44.

58. Ibid, p. 59.

59. Barisal (Bakarganj) Madaripur, Bikrampur, Kishoregunj, the Brahmanbaria subdivision of Tippera, and Calcutta itself.

60. Sarkar, op cit., pp. 358-359.

61. Ibid, p. 72.

The translations of songs in this article are the author's own. Not all are apt, and are being revised. — M.C.