

Reviving Economy Through Swadeshi: A Survey of Hindi Literary Activities of Late Nineteenth Century Colonial North India

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Abstract

Indian subcontinent has experienced an extremely exploitive colonial-capitalist apparatus that aimed to establish its hegemony over the colonized and in turn, destructed the indigenous industries. The different phases of capitalism, mercantilist to industrial and finance, the colonial stranglehold established India as the most fabulous market for its industrial production and merely a source for augmenting raw materials. Indian intelligentsia realized such cycles of exploitations and responded their dissents in different vernacular activities. This paper seeks to examine the responses of Hindi writers in the late nineteenth century who not only registered their blistering attacks on British policies but also suggested a number of elements for the revival of Indian economy. The adoption of swadeshi and the boycott of *videshi* were propagated as integral factors of an emerging nationalism. Historians tend to associate the emergence of *swadeshi* and boycott of foreign items with that of early twentieth century Bengal and as important tool of Gandhian ideology. This work locates the origin of *swadeshi* in the last quarter of the nineteenth century which was considered as the most significant element to be adopted by Indians for the overall revival of Indian economy. It can be seen as an ‘passive’ instrument (in Gramscian term)of resistance against the colonial rule. This paper would also change the perception on Hindi litterateurs that they only engaged in disseminating communal hatred, superstitions and religiosity but delineates how their writings were concerned to affairs of the day.

Key words:Swadeshi,Bhartendu Mandal, Indian economy, nationalism, Hindi.

Introduction

The adoption and propagation of *swadeshi* was the outcome of the experiences of devastating and oppressive British rule. The British policies brought a prolonged era of drain of wealth, destruction of local trades and manufacturing unit, deindustrialization of indigenous industries, rampant unemployment

among Indians and age-old self-sufficiency. This paper seeks to examine such concerns of Hindi writers, Bhartendu Harishchandra, Balkrishna Bhatt, Pratapnarayan Mishra and Badrinarayan Chaudhary Premghan who consistently emphasized on the adoption of swadeshi and boycott of *videshi* in most incontrovertible manner. It must be noted that most of the historian traced and associated it with the famous swadeshi movement (1903-08) of Bengal that made inroads in the early years of the twentieth century that culminated after the partition of Bengal in 1905. The notion of degenerating Aryanism and cyclical decline adumbrated by early Orientalist was central to the discourses of Hindi writers. The notion of ‘degenerating’ Indians and their economic-socio-cultural institutions had profound impact on Indian intelligentsia. The depiction of *durdasha* (depravity) in every sphere of Indian life has been a regular theme in their writings. These writers associated negative changes India and the overall cultural declination of Indians to colonialdeeds. The propagation of swadeshi has emerged as an attempt to counter Britishhegemony. Most importantly, they provided a cogent critique of colonial economic policies that appeared as a counter-point to white’s man civilizing mission. They were fully convinced that any progress under the British was like horns of the ass. Therefore, by devising certain ‘new’ strategies and objections, an anti-colonial perception has been constructed in the late nineteenth century. Their ‘imagining of nation and nationalism have contained avery intricatethemes of acceptance and rejection and a blend of tradition and modernity. The paper would demonstrate how the demand for swadeshi has already been registered as intimate issue for the people of North Western Provinces in the late nineteenth India.

It is evident that Indian intelligentsia began to realise ‘un-British’ character of the *raj* in India. The works¹ of Naoroji, Ranade, R. C. Dutt had a deep impact over other incipient nationalist leaders of India, including Hindi litterateurs of the late nineteenth century. In fact, journalists associated with *Bhartendu Mandal* have totally exposed the British exploitative policies in India by delineating a grim picture of its economy. Literary activities of any era are representative of existing and speculative assertions, aspirations and apprehensions of the society. Any literary text has to be analysed within the ‘ecology’ of other texts and other prevalent ‘conditions’. The intertwined study of language and history required a very ‘gentle’ touch because both tend to narrate a complex picture of the socio-cultural structures and events. The newly emerged Hindi literary activities have been associated with a number

of prominent themes and traditions of the late nineteenth century India pertaining to nationalism, communalism, socio-political consciousness, social reformism, gender and caste issues power-hegemony and so on.

Bhartendu has been accused for keeping tremendous faith in the British raj but he also, did not hesitate to register that: “*pai dhan videsh chali jaat thai ati khavari*” (all wealth is being taken to foreign land, it tortures me a lot).ⁱⁱ He termed British era as: “*ab mahaghor kaal upasthith hai*” (most terrifying age)ⁱⁱⁱ. He was perhaps the first to raise the voice against economic exploitation under the raj. Bhartendu Harishchandra decries over the attitude of Indians for liking and imitating foreign items and considering them superior. He ridiculed the Indians for their over-dependence on *videshi* items and states that every item of our necessity came from foreign land and Indian had nothing indigenous left, except their moustache. His plays, travelogues, poems and satires demonstrated the sorry state of affairs during British India. He termed British India as ‘*adharm rajya*’^{iv}(iniquitous state) and only being concerned to its economic interests. He equated the relationship between the colonial and colonized as between *bhakshy* (predator) *bhakshy* (prey). His plays such as *Bharat Durdasha*, *Andher Nagari Chupat Raja*, *Nildevi*, etc. are full of depiction of loss of Indian virtues and selfhood that were detrimental to the Indian economy, society and nation. Bhartendu consistently ridiculed those newly educated Indians who considered foreign items as most superior than the indigenous ones. He asked the countrymen to take pledge to embrace only *swadeshi*. But he himself was fond of using foreign goods and continued to print advertisement for selling them in his newspapers.

Badrinarayan Chaudhary Premghan was well-aware about the incessant ‘drain of wealth’ from India and complained that the British were very callous who “lay hold of all wealth and grain”^v from here. He was closely associated with the activities of Indian National Congress until the decade of 1910. In an essay, *swadeshi vastu swikar aur videshi ka bahishkar* (adoption of swadeshi and the boycott of foreign goods), Premghan asks the compatriots to generate an affection towards *swadeshi* goods. He argued that leaders of India must promote a distinct culture to disseminate *swadeshaunrag* (affection to the country) through popularizing indigenous items. Premghan termed it as *swadeshanurag* (affection towards nation) and felt an urgent need to adopt swadeshi in every sphere of life.^{vi} He also condemned

those Indians who find foreign goods better than the indigenous and called them the people with an inverted wit. He says: *videshi vastu ki bharmar, se bharat ki dasa vichar, saka swadeshi vrat nahi dhar, baar baar usko dhikkar* (bountifulness of alien goods has been responsible for the plight of India, those individuals who do not take pledge to embrace *swadeshi*, must be reprimanded continuously). His idea for the promotion of *swadeshi* was not confined to the realm of economy but similar to other compatriots of Bhartendu *mandal*, he advocated to adopt *swadeshi* educational system in India because they considered the spread of western education as the biggest threat to Indian-hood and Hindu *dharma*. The western education system was said to have destroyed the Indian/Hindu culture. The narrative of great Indian spirituality and western materialism were juxtaposed consistently to delineate the superlative-ness of Indian civilizational ethos.

Balkrishna Bhatt also highlighted the state of Indian economy, destruction of handicraft industries and continuous ‘loot’ under the raj. He argued that the ‘free trade’ policy of Adam Smith has been extremely disastrous to India economy because in spite of producing large amount of grain countrywide, Indians were subjected to frequent occurrences of famine and hunger. The alleviation of poverty would not be possible until such unilateral free trade continues and even the movement of *swadeshi* and boycott would be ineffective as long as this state of affairs are kept of going. Bhatt consistently exhorted Indian to attain self-sufficiency, self-belief and mutual-cooperation for the sake of regeneration of India. It was regarded as an essential element of India’s pathway to become a nation state. He condemned the British for being only driven by their own colonial needs, depriving India from the path of industrialization and progress. When protector becomes predator, he argued, one can easily imagine the woes and grief of the country and its people. In spite of that, if Indians committed to reform and revival of its economy, he emphasized, British policy would not affect the prospect of India in decisive ways. He cites the example of Japan and America, who attained enormous wealth and power due to their self-dependency.^{vii} He also suggested that the oath to use *swadeshi* must be made an integral part of the religion and Indian women must be taught that if they use foreign goods, would go to hell. In an essay *bharat ki aarat dasa* (deprived condition of India) written in 1896, he argued that the resources or conditions which are primarily necessary for the Industrial Revolution, were available in India and asked the peasant to produce raw material only for indigenous goods. Balkrishna Bhatt

emphasized that India could achieve western progressive growth only through adopting and propagating *swadeshi*. He argued that the collective mentality of the Indians has enslaved them because they were reluctant to use clothes, shoes and other essential goods made in Meerut, Agra, Delhi, Calcutta, Murshidabad and other parts of India.

Pratapnarayan Mishra also bemoans at the high revenue collections made by British through taxes, octroi and donations that never comes back to India. He argued that depravity, dejection and evil conditions plagued India due to such ‘drain’. Then he asks the Indians to cooperate with each other and work for the development of indigenous industries.^{viii} Mishra declared indigenous clothes as much better than the cloths made in Manchester. He emphasized that the adoption of *swadeshi* would not only revive Indian handicraft industries but also enhance a feeling of *quamiyat* (mutual-affinity) among the Indians. Mishra condemned the attitude of the people of North Western Provinces for being engaged only in mutual conflicts, raising expanses and following superstitions but on the other hand, he questioned: how did Bengal develop its knowledge and education? How did the people of Bombay sharpen their skills? He condemned the Indian weavers for not being able to produce clothes of their deceased’s last rites. In fact, these writers used different ways to exhort Indians to adopt *swadeshi* at any cost. He was very critical of the well-proclaimed ideological façade of ‘rule of law’ by the British and argued that instead of dependence over such centres of law, Indians must come up unitedly, reject British judicial system and resolve all their litigations and issues through *panchayats*. He also asked rich Indians to open *swadeshi* educational institutions to inculcate *sanatan* values among their children.

Conclusion

It is well-known to all that the interfaces of Gandhi on *swadeshi* and boycott were exceedingly successful in mustering the masses for the cause of nation. It was associated with the daily life of each individual and emerged as a significant catalyst for arousing a feeling of nationalism. The efforts of Gandhi are being highly acclaimed and recognized by the entire world. It is clear that the *swadeshi* movement has got a strong impetus from the late nineteenth century Hindi writers who consistently drew the portrayal of collective melancholy of the Indians under the British raj to arouse a feeling of nationalism. Their imagining of nation had a very potent image of *swadeshi* that was capable enough to

regenerate the degenerating race of Indians. The successive governments in independent India till date have deceived the masses by proclaiming it as the harbinger of promoting *swadeshi*. A number of claims are being made both at national and international levels but not concrete has been achieved. In fact, in the spite of globalization, indigenous industries were exposed to the world market for destruction. In stead of providing them governmental support and concessions, all efforts are being made in the direction of fetching foreign investments and selling-off indigenous enterprises are underway on a rapid pace.

Endnotes

ⁱ Indian intelligentsia have raised serious objections over the ‘good rule’ (*suraj*) and the farce of British civilizing mission in India. Most notably among them, Dadabhai Naoroji, *The Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, Mahadev Govind Ranade, *Essays on Indian Economics* and Romesh Chandra Dutt *Economic History India* are being cited as prime examples of the emergence of economic nationalism in late nineteenth India.

ⁱⁱ Bhartendu Harishchandra, *Bhartendu Samagra*, (ed.) (1987) Sharma, Hemant, Hindi Pracharak Publication Private limited, Varanasi, p. 460.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bhartendu Harishchandra, *Bhartendu Samagra*, (ed.) (1987) Sharma, Hemant, Hindi Pracharak Publication Private limited, Varanasi, p. 976.

^{iv} Bhartendu Harishchandra, Bhartendu Harishchandra Granthawali-1, ed. Omprakash Singh (New Delhi: Prakashan Sansthan, 2008) p. 277-78.

^v Badrinarayan Chaudhary Premghan, *Premghan Sarvasva-I*, ed. Prabhakeshwar Prasad Upadhyay and Dinesh Narayan Upadhyay (Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan Allahabad. 1951), p. 267-92

^{vi} Badrinarayan Chaudhary Premghan, *Premghan Sarvasva-I*, ed. Prabhakeshwar Prasad Upadhyay and Dinesh Narayan Upadhyay (Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan Allahabad. 1951), p. 136.

^{vii} Satya Prakash Misra (eds.) *Balkrishna Bhatt ke Kshreshtra Nibandh* (Allahabad: Lok Bharti Prakashan, 1999), p. 61-64, 83.

^{viii} Pratapnarayan Mishra, *Pratapnarayan Mishra Kavitali*, ed. Naresh Chander Chaturvedi (Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 1987), p. 23, 32, 39, 59.