

# Reflections on Sumit Sarkar's "The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, India and Elsewhere"

Bernard Bate

The republication of Sumit Sarkar's *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908* in 2010 (New Delhi: Permanent Black) invited reflection on swadeshi at large as much as the scholarship of politics, modernity and the idea of India since the book was first published in 1973. Most of the papers collected in this section were first written for a special panel convened in Hawaii in 2011 by the Association of Asian Studies (AAS) to think again about Sarkar's book, its intellectual moment and his work in general.

As we organised the panel we were not aware that the president of the AAS would also propose to invite Sarkar to the Honolulu meetings to honour him with their highest honour, the Award for Distinguished Contributions to Asian Studies. President K Sivaramakrishnan argued that Sarkar would be an ideal recipient based both on his scholarship and citizenship, intellectual innovation, and his advancement of academic freedoms, singling out the "Towards Freedom" project. The South Asia Council, which sponsored the panel, unanimously agreed. In the event, the audience for the panel the following spring was happily graced by both Sarkar and his partner Tanika Sarkar as we all reflected on the swadeshi movement in Bengal, in India more broadly, and elsewhere.

As Sarkar noted, the swadeshi movement articulated virtually every major idiom that would define the freedom struggle, Indian nationalism, and even postcolonial democratic politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – boycott and the promotion of swadeshi commerce, especially in textiles; the appeal to labour; the use of folk motifs in song and story; new literature, poetry and drama in political protest; the production of nationalist space and time; and, of course, the systematic interpellation of the "people" as a new political agency through swadeshi languages. A pioneer of the historiographic method, Sarkar's book was written using newspapers, plays, poetry and unpublished memoirs, along with colonial archives. These were methodological innovations well ahead of their time when he first published in 1973.

The first major work on swadeshi, then, was also among the most innovative. For another aspect of the book that was ahead of its time was its refusal of nationalist teleology. One of the central aims of Sarkar's book was to break apart the single narrative of anti-colonialism to which nationalist historiography of the time had reduced swadeshi and to recognise the multiple struggles within swadeshi and outside it as well. Further, it introduced the first challenge to a

nationalist historiography that often cast swadeshi as Indian and Indian alone by erasing the linkages actors shared with people in other places such as Germany, Japan, North America and the Soviet Union.

The papers by Dilip Menon, Kris Manjapra and Maia Ram-nath begin with swadeshi transnationalism in a number of dimensions. Menon's piece, which serves as a thematic introduction to the collection, begins by locating the swadeshi movement and *The Swadeshi Movement*, both moment and book, at specific conjunctures. He argues that the movement was located "at the cusp" of a global emergence of political affinity among anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist actors, nationalist partisans, anarchists and revolutionaries of all stripes. And while the swadeshi movement has been interpreted as the first flush of organised nationalism in India by nationalist and Cambridge historians alike, "the deterritorialised politics of affinity generated by swadeshi, over and against the imagined community of the nation, was its greatest legacy". Just as Sarkar's "hard-headed and visionary" intervention in the early 1970s was among a vanguard of Indian histories that emphasised the multiple Indias of Indian nationalism, Menon seeks to rescue swadeshi from the parochial landscape of Bengal and India itself. Following Manjapra's lead, he sees swadeshi as one node within a network of transnational actors and communities seeking affiliation and solidarity beyond the nation state.

Kris Manjapra focuses in particular on what he calls the intellectual openness to foreign centres of knowledge that marked the *longue duree* of the swadeshi imaginaire from the 1900s to the 1950s. This, of course, is counter-intuitive to anyone first approaching a movement so named and marked by swadeshi clothes, languages, literature and education. At the same time, anyone reading through swadeshi journalism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century can only be struck by the wide-ranging references to the women's movement in Britain, the Japanese defeat of the Russians, Boer rebels, Chinese boycotters and Russian and French anarchists. "In the years from 1903–21", Manjapra writes, "there was no shortage of distant mirrors in which swadeshi activists could see their own revolutionary pursuits reflected back".

Swadeshi leaders formed a number of institutions to raise funds to send workers, students and researchers around the world on study tours or to receive education in selected universities in Japan, Germany and California. One Bengal society alone sent about 1,000 students abroad. Such "irrigation of knowledge", in Rabindranath Tagore's fecund phrase, was central to Tagorean swadeshimism — and to the long swadeshimism of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Manjapra convincingly argues that such intellectual openness should be added to the larger characteristics of swadeshimism discussed in Partha Chatterjee's notion of indigenous cultural autonomy (the "inner" vs the "outer" spheres) and Sarkar's social constructiveness.

Maia Ramnath focuses on the transnational linkages that produce "the perhaps unexpected category" of anarchism. Swadeshi anarchism represented a peculiar nexus of radical revolutionaries from London, Paris, Mexico, Russia and India along with the European revolutionary thought of Giuseppe Mazzini, Peter Kropotkin and Mikhail Bakunin and the karma yoga of the Gita. The curriculum for trainees at Aurobindo and Barindra Kumar Ghose's politico-spiritual centre at Maniktola Garden, for instance, involved lectures on karma yoga and the "propaganda of the deed", economics, history, philosophy of revolution, and the preparation of explosives. Swadeshi anarchism also promoted a quasi-mystical appreciation of the bomb and mixed that revolutionary violence with, for instance, the worship of Kali — a Mother India decidedly opposite to the *pativrata* of a broader nationalist fantasy and ethos.

The Indian Home Rule Society in London and its mouthpiece, *The Indian Sociologist*, advocated vigorously for the swadeshi cause in the English public sphere while linking Indian swaraj to the progressive libertarian thinking of people such as Herbert Spencer. And Paris at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century became an “unparalleled hub for crossfertilisation among students and political exiles from countries throughout East Asia and the Ottoman Empire, including Chinese, Japanese, Turkish, Egyptian, Lebanese and Filipino patriots of various modernist, liberal, socialist and anarchist bent”. In a larger historical intervention, Ramnath looks to the surprising (and in some ways counter-intuitive) entailments of this moment later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, both the right and left political strands in India were to reprise the self-Orientalising rejections of certain elements of modernity that were swadeshi themes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The cultural creativity that Sarkar posited as one of the hallmarks of the swadeshi movement is taken up in the final two papers of the section by Bernard Bate and Charu Gupta. Bate discusses the twin swadeshi innovations that were joined at the hip – vernacular political oratory by activists on the one hand and vernacular shorthand by the police on the other.

Bate begins with a 1907 document by the secretary of state for India that explicitly set out the relationship between new kinds of political agitations using vernacular speeches and the difficulty they pose in the prosecution of sedition. More broadly, Bate argues that the development of shorthand was a response to an epistemological uncertainty evoked by the vernacular public meeting that produced a condition of profound insecurity among colonial officials.

Though shorthand was developed as a mode of disciplining and punishing by the rulers, it also became an ordinary mode of everyday life for those ruled. Throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – really until the spread of personal computing in the early 2000s – shorthand was one of the key skills, along with typewriting, cultivated by would-be government and quasigovernment employees in thousands of training centres throughout the country. A mode of political surveillance and discipline produced by the police became a mode of bodily comportment, a skill like playing an instrument, to which hundreds of thousands, and even millions of young men and women habituated themselves. Young political actors began to speak against the state, the authorities responded, new surveillance techniques were created, new disciplines enforced – and a new life-way was formed.

Charu Gupta revisits the familiar example of swadeshi clothing styles for women. However, citing Sarkar’s call to explore “the struggle within” swadeshi, she identifies the multiple currents and contestations of ideology that were woven into the fabric of “national dress”. What we understand as swadeshi fashion constituted a “new vocabulary of sartorial morality” for the modern bourgeoisie that served as markers for eligibility of some people in the “ideal body politic of swadeshi” – and thereby inclusion within the ideal body politic of the Indian nation – while excluding others: “the bad housewife, the westernised woman, the converted dalit”. Examining cartoons, illustrations, advertisements and popular vernacular writings, the piece forefronts the contestations over sexuality and morality along with the inherently ambiguous nature of the movement.

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