

PARTITION OF BENGAL AND THE EXTREMISTS ACTIVITIES IN TAMILNADU (1905 – 1911)

Dr. H.K. Sulaiman Khan

*Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of History, C Abdul Hakeem College (Autonomous)
Melvisharam, Vellore District, India.*

ABSTRACT

The Partition of Bengal in 1905 by Lord Curzon, the Governor General of India made a great reaction among the people of India, particularly the Bengalis who opposed the measure by all possible means. It was the first major political action of the colonial government after the outbreak of the 1857 revolt and it paved the way for a series of political activities in the form of Swadesi Movement and others. Lord Curzon gave colour for the partition as administrative reasons but the people of Bengal did not accept it and raised the banner of revolt. In Tamilnadu, the press and public rendered their support to the people of Bengal by opposing the partition. The leading press like Swadesa Mitran, the Swadesi, Altab-e-Dakhan, Shamsul-Akbar, Indian Patriot and others opposed the partition and criticized Lord Curzon and his partition policy. In Tamilnadu meetings were organized to express their resentments against the partition. The partition paved the way for the emergence of Swadesi Movement. The assassination of a British official, the Surat split in which the southern parts of Madras Presidency took a major role. Subramania Bharathi, Subramania Siva, V.O. Cidaambaram Pillai and others organized the Swadesi movement and gave a rude shock to the colonial administration. As a response to the agitation, Lord Curzon was replaced by Lord Minto on 18th November 1905. At last in December 1911, King George V, revoked the partition at the Delhi Durbar. The Partition of Bengal gave series of important events in Indian politics as well as Tamilnadu and its impacts speed up the actions of National leaders in India and abroad for national cause. There are number of researches going on the role of Tamilnadu in Indian National movement and so on but there is no substantial research on the extremist's role in the national movement particularly in Tamilnadu. So that in this paper aimed to bring out the partition of Bengal and the extremists activities in Tamilnadu. The plenty of primary and secondary sources are available in Tamilnadu State Archives encouraged me to undertake this research on extremists activities in particular period.

The programme of the partition of Bengal was not a sudden step. Its attempt was made in April 1902, When Lord Curzon planned to alter certain boundaries of the districts of central, Eastern and Southern India by adding and removing certain parts from one portion to another portion. Accordingly he reviewed that the existing boundaries of Bengal, Assam, the Central Provinces and Madras were to be altered for better administration. As a continuing measure in December 1903, the Government of India headed by Lord Curzon sent letters to several of the local Government (which were also published in the official Gazettes) announced their desire to consider the redistribution of certain territories of the Eastern and North Eastern provinces of India, notably of Bengal and Assam.¹ Their attention had been called to furnish evidences of the excessive and intolerable administrative burden imposed upon the Bengal Government and of the consequent deterioration in the standards of Government, notably in the partition of East Bengal. Simultaneously the importance of rendering Assam a self-contained and independence administration with a service of its own and of providing for its future commercial and industrial expansion was impressed upon them.²

The considerations suggested a careful investigation of the circumstances and surroundings of both provinces and resulted in the formulation of certain proposals for the readjustment of their territorial boundaries. Besides, it was contemplated to transfer certain territories from Madras to Bengal and to the greater part of Chota Nagpur, from Bengal to the central provinces. The local Government did not accept the proposal. Like this the decision to take Ganjam from Madras Presidency for annexing with Bengal was also opposed by the Madras Government. In order to uphold the views, Lord Curzon made a series of attempted finally drafted the plan to the partition of Bengal.³

On 14th September 1905, the Governor General in Council proclaimed the formation of the new provinces of Eastern Bengal and Assam with effect from 16th October 1905. The new provinces entitled East Bengal and

Assam should function with the states of a Lieutenant Governorship, consisting of the Chittagong, Dacca, and Rajathani division of Bengal. The districts of the Hill state of Tripura and the Chief Commissionership of Assam and the station of Darjeeling remained with Bengal. Its Capital was located at Dacca with subsidiary headquarters at Chittagong. The new state was comprised of the area of 106510 square miles and a population of 31 million, of whom 18 million were Mohammedans and 12 million Hindus. It possessed a legislative council, and a Board of Revenue of the members and the Judicature of High Court at Calcutta was left undisturbed. The existing province of Bengal, diminished surrounding of these large territories on the East and the five hill states of Chotta Nagpur, but increased by the acquisition of Sambalpur and the five Orissa states consisted 141580 square miles with a population of 54 million of who 42 million were Hindus and 9 million were Muhammadans.⁴

The Governor General in Council passed the partition resolution on 14th September 1905 at Shimla and it came in to force on 16th October 1905. Further Joseph Bam Fylde Fuller of the Indian Civil Services, the then Chief Commissioner of Assam was appointed as the first Lieutenant Governor of the new province with all powers and authority. A Council was constituted with fifteen members of whom the Lieutenant Governor could nominate for his assistance in making laws and regulations.⁵ The partition of Bengal made a hue and cry in Bengal. The intelligentsia and the elite people raised their banner of revolt against the partition. It provoked the people to launch a series of agitation in Bengal. One of the major outcomes was the emergence of Swadeshi movement by which the people boycotted foreign goods for developing native industries. A number of public meetings were organized in Bengal as a mark of protest against the partition. Besides, the Calcutta bar and the politicians expressed their resentments. The press in Bengal fuelled the fire by their writings and opposed the partition.⁶

Madras, the elite city of British India and the capital of South India was not silent about the partition of Bengal. A city honey combed with intelligentsia and a number of presses both in English and Vernacular languages expressed their reactions through their writings. After 1857, they woke up from a long slumber and launched anti British activities. Swadesamitran, a leading Tamil newspaper took the lead of publishing leading issue with black borders and stated that instead of partition. Lord Curzon should have appointed a Governor with an articles against the partition. On 23rd June 1905, it indicated that the people of Bengal would not tolerate the partition of Bengal and would prepare protests. Further on 21st July 1905, it criticized the secretary of state for sanctioning the partition and published its executive council for Bengal without disturbing the then set up or partition.⁷ Subsequently the newspapers Desabhimani of 12th August 1905, Guntur, Nadegannadi of 19th August (Bangalore) Swadesamitran of 26th August 1905 (Madras) Swadesi of 23rd August 1905(Madras) expressed their antagonism on the partition matter and encouraged the Bengal people to participate the Swadeshi Movement.⁸

The partition of Bengal had its repercussions in Madras where the people made common cause with the Bengalis. As a response to the call of Bengalis and reactions to Bengal partition, the Madras people began to launch the Swadeshi movement. In November 1905, the Madras Mahajana Sabha organized a protested meeting against the partition of Bengal. Subsequently on 23rd February 1906, a public meeting was organized in front of the Pachaiyappa's College for propagating the Swadeshi Movement. In the meeting it was requested that all citizens of Madras should participate in the Swadeshi Movement and boycott the foreign goods.⁹

The Madras reaction of the partition of Bengal got a new turn when the southern parts of the Madras Presidency particularly Tirunelveli District took the lead in this sphere in a new dimension. At the outset Swadeshi Movement in Tirunelveli was started by Ramakrishna Iyer, a Vakil in September 1905. Subsequently in April 1906, V.O. Cidambaram Pillai started the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company in Tuticorin. V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, Subramania Siva, Subramania Barathi and their associates delivered a serious of lectures in and around of Tirunelveli for the causes of Swadesi goods which roused he feelings of the people who launched a number of strikes and lock-outs and burnt foreign goods in public.¹⁰ The anti-British activities of the patriotic personalities and their followers gave a rude shock to the British administration which began to suppress the Swadeshi movement by means of force and judiciary.¹¹ The outcome was that the leaders were put behind the bars by sentencing different terms of imprisonment. The Swadeshi Movement went to the climax when the District Collector and Magistrate of Tirunelveli, Ashe was shot dead in a first class railway compartment at

Maniyachi railway station on 17th June 1911 by Vanchi Iyer alias Sankara Iyer.¹² Subsequently, the partition of Bengal, Swadeshi Movement and Concept of Boycott paved the way for the first open split within the Congress party in 1907. Furthermore, the Benares Session of 1905 and Calcutta session of 1906, the two sessions of the Indian National Congress in which difference of opinion created in the minds of Tamil Nadu leaders about the concept of Boycott. So that it led to the first open split namely the Moderates and Extremists within the Congress party. The twenty first session of the Indian National Congress held on 27th to 30th December 1905 at Benares, presided over by Gopala Krishna Gokhale, protested against the partition of Bengal, but did not ready to extend open support to the concept of boycott.¹³ From Tamil Nadu V. Krishnaswamy Iyer who was belonging to Mylapore group, now the leader and supporter of Gokhale also opposed the concept of boycott. Apart from V. Krishnaswami Iyer, other leaders from Tamil Nadu like L.A. Govindaragava Iyer, GA. Natesan, K.R. Guruswami Iyer, S. Srinivasa Iyengar, C. Vijayaraghavachariar and G. Subramaniya Iyer also played a crucial role during this session.¹⁴ So that this conference threw the factional spark which reflected the next Congress Session. Subsequently, the growing rift between the Old group (Who were opposed the concept of boycott) and the New group in Tamil Nadu became apparent after the launch of the Swadeshi movement in the wake of the 1905 Congress Session. New group leaders like Mandayam family S. Srinivasachari, S.N. Tirumalachari and M.P. Tirumalachari, C. Subramaniya Barathi, V.O. Cidambaram Pillai, V. Chakkarai chetti, Ethiraj Surendranath Arya and others began to insist the leadership of the Madras Mahajana Shaba as well as its continuing hold on the Madras Provincial Conference.¹⁵ In June 1906, the 14th Madras Provincial Conference was held at Tirunelveli, bringing together important leaders from all over Madras Presidency under the banner of Swadeshism.¹⁶ From Tamil Nadu leaders like G. Subramaniya Iyer, G.A. Natesan, C. Karunakaramenon, A. Rajaram Iyer, G. Srinivasa Rao and others were played crucial role in this conference.¹⁷ In this conference, differences of opinions cropped up between the Old group and the New group surfaced on a range of issues. Given the firm hold enjoyed by the Madras Mahajana Shaba over the Madras Provincial Conference, the proceedings at Tirunelveli and the resolutions passed at the conference reflected the views and pre occupations of the Madras Mahajana Shaba to the exclusion of all others. The 'Memorial' submitted to the British government by the president of the conference fully reflected the old-style politics of polite requests and declaration of loyalty.¹⁸ So that the members of the new group, dissatisfied with the proceedings, held a parallel Swadeshi conference at Palayamcottah in Tirunelveli district, under the chairmanship of G. Subramania Iyer. Here, the new group determined to evolve its own approach to Swadeshism, irrespective of the resolutions passed at the Tirunelveli conference.¹⁹ So that this conference clearly showed that difference of opinions within the Congress party of Tamil Nadu occurred on the issue of boycott and it was continuing the next session of the Indian National Congress at Calcutta. The twenty second session of the Indian National Congress held on 26th to 29th December 1906 at Calcutta. In this conference difference of opinion cropped up in the minds of the leaders of Tamil Nadu about the policy of boycott.²⁰ The old group of leaders like G.K. Gokhale, V. Krishnaswami Iyer, P.R. Sundara Iyer, B.N. Sharma, G.A. Natesan, M. Krishna Nair, L.A. Govindaraghava Iyer and others did not accept the policy of boycott. But the New group of leaders like Bala Gangadara Tilak, Bhipin Chandara Pal, V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, C. Subramania Barathi, M. Narashiman, V. Narashiman, R. Sababathi and others opposed the Moderates politics and they urged the policy of boycott to Indian National Congress. So that the twenty second of the Indian National Congress reflected the ideological conflict within the Congress party and it was held in the 23rd session of the Indian National Congress at Surat. After the Calcutta Congress session of 1906, the rising new group in Tamil Nadu was further strengthened by the visit made by Bhipin Chandra Pal to Madras city in April-May 1907.²¹ In the meanwhile, Keir Hardie, a Labour Party member of the British Parliament, visited Madras as part of an all India tour to see at first hand the real conditions of the Indian people. When Keir Hardie reached Madras on 14th November 1907, he was warmly received by both the contending political personalities. Hardie addressed the Madras Mahajana Shaba, visited several Swadeshi enter prices in and around Madras city, and was warmly received at Chengalpattu, Thanjavur, Madurai, Thiruchirappalli, Tirunelveli and Tuticorin. He then proceeded to Colombo on board by the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company's Steamer.²² In his address at the Madras Mahajana Sabha, Hardie stressed the need for unity in the nationalist camp, urging members to forget their differences and to unite them to attain the objectives which the Indian people had at heart.²³ These are all the main factors leading to the first historic split within the Congress party. Since 1907 onwards, the Congress party was openly divided into two groups namely Moderates and Extremists. In Tamil Nadu, Moderates group was run by

the Mylapore group and the Extremists group was run by the Egmore group. Since the Congress Party of Tamil Nadu had Mylapore and Egmore groups in 1907 onwards the two groups were rightly called Moderates and Extremists because this was the first open split occurred within the Congress party after its formation in 1885.

At the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress, it was resolved to hold the 23rd session at Nagpur and the invitation was accepted. Later, the venue was shifted when the majority on the reception Committee expressed their inability to hold the Congress session there. The real cause of discard among members at Nagpur was the dispute over the nomination of Tilak as president of the Congress. The opposition to his nomination stemmed from the feeling of a section in the Congress that the nomination of a person once convicted of sedition would deprive the organisation of all chances of government favour.²⁴ Things were hitting up over this issue when the supporters of Tilak were bent upon placing him the presidential chair. The situation was that the Congress session would be held at Nagpur either with Tilak as president and under the auspices of the Extremists faction. The Moderates was unwilling to accept it. It was clear that one could expect that only Rowdism and Vandalism which were unprecedented in Indian political life would happen if the venue of the Congress would not be changed from Nagpur.²⁵ With the situation getting out of hand, the senior leaders of the Congress agreed that it would not be in the interests of the Congress to attempt to hold the next sitting at Nagpur. The Congressmen of Bombay were much worried over this unpleasant development. Although things were not so bad in Bombay, in view of its proximity to Poona, Amroati and Nagpur, it was genuinely felt that the virus of extremism might travel there too.²⁶ After brief confabulation, Pherozesha Mehta, Wacha, Mudholkar, Chintamani and certain others sent telegrams as well as letters to Krishnaswamy Iyer asking to hold the session at Madras. By doing so, they banked solely on the intrepidity and vivacity of Krishnaswamy Iyer. Chintamani wrote that as a native of Madras, he trusted Madras would rise to the occasion to do its duty to the Congress and the country. He also stated that a portion of the sum of Rs. 8,000 to Rs. 10,000 collected by the Nagpur Moderates might be made available to him to conduct the Congress.²⁷ After receiving, the telegrams that Krishnaswami Iyer had a meeting with the Madras Mahajana Sabha convened to get a formal approval of the decision to hold the Congress at Madras. Of the 100 members who attended the meeting, 92 were for the decision and 2 against. That was enough for Krishnaswami Iyer to speed up the preparatory work for the Congress, unmindful of the opposition that was building up. Letters were published in the newspapers deploring the decision taken in haste at the Mahajana Saba. The whole matter was attributed to four extremely Moderate leaders namely Pherozeshahmehta, Wacha, Mudholkar and Krishnaswami Iyer.²⁸ Many nationalist leaders of the Madras Presidency were already enraged by Krishnaswami Iyer's open letter to N. Subba Rao, president of Madras Provincial Conference at Vizagapatam, which was published in all newspapers and journals in May 1907.²⁹

Meanwhile, new group of leaders in Tamil Nadu, determined to have their own say about the Surat session of Congress and organized on 18th December 1907, a public meeting under the auspices of the Swadeshi Vastu Pracharini Sabha, with Duraiswami Iyer, the president of the saba in the chair. Four resolutions were passed two proposed by C. Subramania Bharathi, one by Duraiswamy Iyer and the fourth by V. Chakkarai Chetti. One of the resolutions proposed by Subramania Barathi clearly indicated the mood of the new group leadership.³⁰ The resolution stated that the meeting seriously condemned the action of the Congress reception committee at Surat for not having consulted the other provinces in the matter of electing the president of the congress and overlooked the claims of Lala Lajpati Rai to the same.³¹ The resolutions passed indicated that the new group's delegates would be adamant in the pursuit of their goals at Surat. Despite of their difference, the two groups, the new and old travelled to Surat in the same train under the common banner of Madras Nationalists. But the homogeneity of the Madras delegation mustered during the train journey was lost at the very start of the Surat session. On 24th and 25th December, the new group met under the chairmanship of Aurobindo Ghosh to discuss its strategy. It was decided that the Congress be asked to include on the Surat agenda resolutions on boycott, Swaraj and National education. If their demands were not considered favourably, Tilak would oppose the motion of electing Rashbehari Ghosh to the presidential chair.³²

The 23rd session of the India National Congress was held at Surat on 26th and 27th December 1907. At Surat 6000 spectators and 1600 delegates gathered. The proceedings were marked by bitter radicalism and rowdiness.

The proceedings began with an address of the chairman of the reception committee. Tribhovandas Malvi, the chairman of the reception committee welcomed the delegates. After the reading of the address was over, Ambalal Saker Desai proposed that Rashbihari Ghose nominated by the reception committee for the office of president under the rules adopted at the last session of the Congress, he should take the presidential chair.³³ As soon as A.S. Desai uttered Ghose's name some voices were heard in the centre of the hall shouting no, no, and the shouting was depth up for some time. The proposer, however managed to struggle through his proposition.³⁴ As soon as he began his speech-before he had finished even is first sentence, the greatest disturbance proceeded from the front rows of the Madras and Deccan blocks of delegates. They called loudly for Tilak and Lala Lajpat Rai did not allow Banerjee to talk but the old group members urged him to go on and he made repeated attempts to make himself heard, but scarcely a word could be heard above the noisy clamour of the new group members. They were only about 30, the majority of them coming from Madras.³⁵ It was clear that rowdyism had been determined upon to bring the proceedings to a stand-still, and the whole demonstration seemed to have been re-arranged. Finding it impossible to enforce order, the chairman warned the House that unless the uproar subsided at once, he would be obliged to suspend the sitting of the Congress. The hostile demonstration, however, continued and the chairman at last suspended the sitting for the day. In the meanwhile, the new group members met the same evening to discuss the next days, proceedings; with the exception of Subramania Barathi, all leading members of the Madras new group attended the strategy session. Later that evening, the entire Madras delegation, comprising both old and new groups, assembled with G. Subramania Iyer in the chair. Duraisami Iyer and Bharathi expressed their hopes that next day's Congress proceedings would go on peacefully, nothing that members of the Madras old group would do their best to ensure. Next morning, the Madras old group assembled separately and vehemently attacked the new group.³⁶ The 2nd day of the session, December 27, was in fact proved fateful. When the session opened at about 12.30 P.M., Tilak, still hopeful of striking a compromise with the Moderates, pencilled the following note to Malvi, chairman of the reception committee: "Sir, I wish to address the delegates on the proposal of the election of the president after it is seconded. I wish to remove an adjournment with a constructive proposal, please announce this."³⁷ Receiving no reply from the chairman, Tilak and his followers allowed Surendranath Bannerji to complete his speech seconding the election of the president. Then, as the motion for the election of Rashbehari Ghosh was receiving prolonged applause, Tilak forced his way on to the platform and stood posted in front of Ghosh. Shouts of disapproval from the Moderates greeted his action. Tilak insisted that he had the right to address the delegates, and told Ghosh, when he attempted to interfere, that he was not yet properly elected. By this time there was general uproar in the pandal.³⁸ An attempt was made with the consent of the chairman to remove Tilak physically from the platform but this was foiled by Gokhale. It was during this confusion that a shoe was hurled at the platform by hitting Pheroshah Metha on the face after touching Surendranath Banerji. Chairs were lifted to be thrown at Tilak from below the platform. On seeing this, Tilak's supporters rushed on to the stage to protect him. Rashbehari Ghosh meanwhile twice attempted to read his presidential address, but in vain. The confusion intensified and the Congress session was suspended sine die. Then the lady-delegates present on the platform had been escorted to the tents outside and other delegates began to disperse with difficulty. The disorder having grown wilder and the police eventually came in and ordered the Hall to be cleared.³⁹

The sequel was the much dreaded split in the Congress which every right thinking congressmen was keen to avert. The shameful occurrences at Surat were unparalleled in the history of any public gathering in India in the past. While many men belonging to both factions contributed their share to the uproar and unruly behaviour, the nationalists of Madras and Nagpur where reported to have had a greater share in the inglorious proceedings.⁴⁰ V.S. Srinivasa sastru who was present at this Congress session, narrate how a Maratha Shoe was thrown and some of the delegates from Madras, indulged into throwing chairs freely. He also saw a young fellow taking a chair and about to strike at him. One of his old student of the Hindu High School attempted to strike at him when he identified him he pretended that he was ignorant of him.⁴¹

The contingent of 30 nationalists who went from Madras to Surat included V.O.Citambaram Pillai, C. Subramaniabarathi and Arya played a vital role in the Congress session according to their capacities. At Surat Railway station, the secretary of the Congress Committee and certain other members who had come to receive the

delegates appeared to have simply ignored them on knowing that they belonged to the new group. At the congress session, when the commotion was at its peak, a Hindustani gentleman settled at Tiruppur, attempted in vain to hand over the group to the police. These leaders attributed all the untoward happening including the rough handling of two of their men by the police, to Pherozechamehta.⁴²

In the aftermath of these events, the Indian National Congress formally split into the old group, henceforth termed the Moderates and the new group or Extremists. After the adjournment of the 23rd session sine die on the afternoon of 27 December some of the Moderate leaders met at the house of Mehta the same evening but they were really at a loss to know what was to be done. At this juncture, Krishnaswami Iyer suggested that without frittering away their energies and wasting their time in reconstructing the congress which had broken, they should have a convention of trustworthy and loyal delegates who could help to rebuild the congress on that plan. This was accepted and Krishnaswami Iyer himself prepared the draft which later developed into the creed of the Congress.

The results of the Surat split were that the Extremists were excluded from the congress membership and the Moderates or old guards were firmly in the saddle. The organization ceased to represent the country as a whole and was reduced to the status of a political party. The split did not benefit either party but the demonstration of disunity in the nationalist ranks gladdened the hearts of the imperialists. Though the Extremists set up a committee under Tilak to bring out a rapprochement between the two groups, the organization had to wait till 1916 to achieve that unity. Furthermore, the Congress split at the 1907 Surat session had an important impact not only within the Congress Party but also on Nationalists politics in Tamilnadu. Henceforth, Extremists leaders in the south parted company with the soft, compromising approach of the Madras Mahajana Sabha, transforming Madras and Tamilnadu into a centre of agitational politics. As a first step, a new organization, the Madras Jana Sangam was formed by Extremists leaders at a public meeting in Triplicane, Madras, on January 11, 1908.⁴³ Thus the split and groupism in Congress party in 1907 opened a new chapter in the history of the congress party which predominated successive splits. Subsequently a serious of splits and power struggle continued in the congress party. Now it is a common factor in the congress party that groupism and power struggle is a day today event in the Congress Party. Thus the partition of Bengal in 1905 witnessed the reaction of the native people in the form of Swadeshi movement and achieves which consumed the lives and property of many patriots and few British bureaucrats like Sir Curzon, Wyllie (who was murdered by an Indian, Madan Lal Dhingre in London in 1907) and collector Ashe. The partition crisis culminated in December 1911 when King George V revoked the partition at the Delhi Durbar. Thus the extremists of Tamilnadu played a vital role in the Indian National Movement through their selfless activities.

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