Swadeshi

CHAPTER XII

The word Swadeshi means literally ' Own Country' and has been used in recent years in India to denote that side of the national movement which aims at making India, to a far larger degree than is at present the case, self-contained and self-sufficient, especially in respect of industries and manufactures. Briefly expressed, the object of the movement is to check the drain on Indian capital involved in the purchase of imported goods, by manufacturing the said goods locally ; replacing the removal of money from Indian shores, by a circulation of money within the limits of India herself.

So far so good. But there have been manifested certain weaknesses in the movement, perhaps unavoidable at first, which it is the intention of the present chapter to discuss. Let us consider for a moment the nature of manufactured goods. We may from the Indian point of view divide them in two ways:

(1) into (a) things which are worth having, and
(b) things which are not worth having; and

(2) into (a) things for the manufacture of which India is well adapted by natural resources, national temperament, or existing tradition, and
(b) things which other countries are better able, for analogous reasons, to produce or manufacture.

It will be found, that, to a great extent, the classes (1) a and (2) a, and (1) b and (2) b, have a common application. The imitation of European ways of living, whether in respect of dress, food, architecture or what not, has led to the adoption of many European luxuries which are quite unnecessary, and sometimes positively injurious. We shall certainly be much wiser to do without these useless or injurious things altogether—with economy to ourselves—than we should be in making them locally, even worse than they are made in Europe. There is for example a large class of goods, cheap and nasty, which are manufactured solely for the Eastern market, and which no one with education or taste would use in England. Yet these are purchased eagerly by Indians who desire to furnish in the European style, and in such quantities that their drawing-rooms are more like shops than living-rooms. Not long ago an Indian Prince consulted an European friend as to the furniture in his palace. He said, ' Look here, you are an old friend, I want you to go through my palace and reject everything European which is not worth having, and which only excites the ridicule of Europeans.' The result was that over two lakhs worth of rubbish was sold in Calcutta. It would be difficult to say how many lakhs worth would be disposed of if a similar process were carried out on a wider scale.

Probably ninety per cent, of European articles purchased by Indians are either ugly or useless or both. The rich offend as badly as the poor, indeed more so, as they can afford to buy a larger quantity of useless and ugly things. All of these things cost money, and it is a waste of money not merely because

the money goes out of India. It is a spending of substance for ' that which is not bread.' We shall certainly gain nothing by transferring the seat of their manufacture to India.

Humanity is not in want of manufactures. "Already, all over the world, man is labouring beyond all reason, and producing beyond all demand... Longer, harder toil for the producer, frenzied, criminal extravagance in the consumer, these are the desired results of the development of manufacturing industries, which tends constantly towards increased production and lower prices."—(Max Nordan) This is not civilisation; this not the art of living. Civilisation consists, not in multiplying our desires and the means of gratifying them, but in the refinement of their quality. Industry per se, is no advantage. The true end of material civilisation is not production, but use; not labour, but leisure; not to destroy, but to make possible spiritual culture. A nation which sees its goal rather in the production of things than in the lives of men must in the end deservedly perish. Therefore it is that the Swadeshi movement, a synthesis of effort for the regeneration of India, should be guided by that true political economy that seeks to make men wise and happy, rather than merely to multiply their goods at the cost of physical and spiritual degradation.

Take one or two examples of Indian imports of European haberdashery. India imports over 187 lakhs value annually. What does this mean? It means woollen caps and leather shoes for infants, hats, ties, and collars for men, sometimes even corsets for women, and, if not that, at least safety-pins and ribbons and high-heeled shoes, besides English curtains and carpets for our homes. All this results merely from the mistaken idea of imitating others, in other words, from the attitude of snobbery which not long since was spreading through ' educated' India like a gigantic fungus. The immediate point to be considered here, however, is merely economic; an enormous sum of money per annum might be saved in India by returning to the simple ideas and plain living of our forefathers. There is, then a Swadeshi, a higher Swadeshi, which should boycott certain goods, not because of their foreign origin, but because of their intrinsic worthlessness. Take another class of miscellaneous goods, such as nibs, stationery, scientific instruments, clocks and watches, and a large part of machinery in general and many of the things made by it. Some of these things have with great difficulty been produced in India. But in such cases the quality of the locally manufactured article has been altogether wretched. The patriotic Swadeshist has to pay more for an inferior article. Now I say that, in the face of this state of affairs, it is no use having Swadeshi manufactures unless the home-made things are at least as good as the imported ones, and unless the people of India are benefited by their manufacture. Take for example textiles, which are a speciality of the Swadeshi movement. Here we have clearly something which India has formerly excelled in producing, and still produces in large quantities. But the most vulgar Manchester prints are still fast driving out locally made and artistic materials. At the Madras exhibition of 1903, says Mr. Harris, “side by side with the very many good examples displayed in various textiles, there were a number of specimens of gaudy-coloured goods of weak design, colour and quality, poor imitations of art fabrics and European textiles." Why, then, do people stand with folded arms and look at a declining industry in which there is money without any attempt, in a practical way, to revive the trade ? “Already a change for the worse is visible in the tastes of the common people, and one has only to go into any street or village near a large town to see the glaring cloths of Manchester or German production freely worn by the populace. These are rapidly taking the place of the beautiful white and tinted cloths of hand-loom

work, so lately in general use all over India, and so much of which was, until the middle of the nineteenth century, exported to various countries." The Swadeshi movement has created a new demand for India-manufactured textiles. This has been a true instinct, but the essential weaknesses of the Swadeshi ideal, as hitherto conceived, have limited the value of the result. It matters very little to the village peasant whether his work is stopped by the competition of factories in Lancashire or in Bombay, or whether a few Indian or a few Manchester mill-owners get rich quickly. Just what the factory system is beginning to mean for India may be guessed from some details and extracts from the recent report of the Indian Factory Commission. In daylight mills the average working time for the whole year is 12 hours and 5 minutes; in mills fitted with electric light, 13-13J hours; but the Commissioners say "in some provinces the law is ignored to an extent not hitherto imagined." The law referring to the half-hours recess, " is generally disregarded in rice-mills, ginning factories, presses and flour mills throughout India."

A writer in the Modern Review for October, 1908, commenting on the Report, makes the following extraordinary, statements regarding women's work:

“Coming to the restrictions imposed upon the employment of women by the present Act, the Commission very fairly and reasonably opine that they are neither suitable to the operatives nor to the employers. That has been the general experience of all factory owners who have to employ a large number of females. In Bombay it is seldom the case that they have to work for more than ten hours a day. *So that they have no need to avail themselves of the ½ hour’s mid-day rest prescribed for their benefit by the existing act*. In practice it has been proved beyond cavil that the women prefer to come late to their work and continually work at their winding or reeling machines for the whole time that they wish to work, generally from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. v. c." Italics are mine.

I quote this statement to show what modern India is prepared to accept for the sake of commercial 'progress.' Those familiar with the factory system and its results, in Europe, and the resistance made to regulation and inspection, will be able to read between the lines, and to understand how mistaken India will be if she believes that the agitation for factory regulation is engineered from Lancashire "for the purpose of arresting as far as possible the progress of the cotton industry," by placing restrictions on the indigenous labour employed. It is of no consequence to India whether or no an agitation be engineered in part from Lancashire, or not; what is of consequence to her is whether or no the problems of physical and moral deterioration, overcrowding, drunkenness and unemployment, characterising the development of the commercial system in the great cities of the West, are to be imposed upon the East as well. That there is only too much reason to fear such a result, while there is too little to hope that Indians are any more alive to the danger than Europe was fifty years ago, is evident by other statements in the Report. It appears that in Bombay the operatives inhabit slums of the most wretched character, crowded and insanitary. The rent of a room 12 X 10 X 9 ranges from 2 to 5 Rupees a month, the wages of an ordinary 'hand' being from 7 to 18 rupees a month. They remark that the consumption of liquor among factory workers is undoubtedly greater than among men of the same rank in life engaged in other occupations. The Commission appear to regret that the operatives are still very largely connected with their villages, and are not entirely dependent on factory work!

"There is as yet", say the commissioners, "practically no factory population, such as exists in European countries, consisting of a large number of operatives trained from their youth to one particular class of work and dependent upon employment at that work for a livelihood....Matters however, are gradually improving; the standard of living is undoubtedly rising all over India, though slowly; and there are some indications that a class of factory operatives, detached from agricultural and village life, and depending largely or solely upon industrial employment, is beginning to be formed." “This," remarks the writer already quoted, " is a happy augury of the future physical and material welfare of operatives."

It is indeed sad, for anyone acquainted with the mature developments of industrialism in Europe, the ' town and country ' problem, the filth and squalor of manufacturing centres, and the now increasing desire to once more relate the life of the people to the land, to see India thus light-heartedly plunging into inevitable suffering of the same character.

“It may be," says Mr. Havell, "that legislation, by imposing restriction on the hours of labour and improving sanitary conditions, may check the rapacity of mill-owners and shareholders, and it may be that the latter in their own interests will some day do as much for their employees as wise and considerate men do for their horses and cattle, but even the wisest and most humane cannot in the pursuit of the ideal of cheapness make the modern system of labour, in power-loom mills, otherwise than intellectually and morally degrading. Nor can they remove the even greater evils which the system brings with it — the overcrowded, filthy, air-polluted cities, the depopulation of rural districts and the struggles between capital and labour which in Western countries constantly threaten the very foundations of society."

It is indeed astonishing to find in Bengal that politicians have supported the very un-swadeshi system of power-loom mills. It is true that the boycott of foreign goods has incidentally brought renewed prosperity to the hand-loom weavers; but it is only too evident that in many cases the principle of Swadeshi has been conceived of merely as a political weapon, rather than as the true basis of the re-organization of Indian life, and the means of bringing not merely wealth, but happiness to the Indian people.

I take musical instruments as a further illustration. The manufacture of Indian instruments is a decaying industry. Thirteen lakhs of rupees annually are spent on imported instruments—pianos, violins (including mechanical ones) and harmoniums and gramophones, the universal popularity of which is ample testimony of the degradation of Indian taste in recent times. And so while small Indian capitalists are in a position to exploit the national sentiment by making wretched imitations of good English paper, nibs, or soap, the skilled craftsman, in this case the maker of musical instruments, is starving for want of occupation, and his hereditary knowledge, a definite asset in the national credit, is passing away forever. While groups of well-meaning individuals are busy making bad Swadeshi biscuits, and others sacrifice a few pice per pound to buying them, the carver of wood, the ivory inlayer, the drawer of wire and the professional musician are all neglected for the travesties of music performed on harmoniums or lily flutes, or reproduced ad nauseam on gramophones, the profit on whose manufacture goes out of India. Not that it would be any advantage to make them locally. The hope of reviving trade by reproducing locally any article that may come into fashion, without regard to its real

value, is as delusive as it is mean. It is never an advantage to a nation to produce useless or vicious luxuries; it does not increase the national wealth. By the time your harmonium factory is doing well and Indians in it, working seventeen hours a day, are producing for the share-holders a dividend of 35 %, or more (as in the Bombay cotton mills), some European or American invents a ' harmoniola' or something equally insane, cheaper and easier to play,—and where are you then? But no foreigner could make for you a vina, or paint or inlay it with ivory, or carve for it a figure of Sarasvati; those are things which European or American factories cannot do.

It is just so with other arts and industries: we neglect what lies at our doors, to buy from afar what we do not understand and cannot use to advantage. No wonder that we are poor; aesthetic demoralisation and commercial failure will always be inseparable in the long run. Cast aside the village weavers traditional skill, not only in technique but in design, and you destroy so much of the national culture, and the whole standard of living is ultimately lowered. Competition with Europe, on the lines of modern commercialism must involve intellectual, and ultimately industrial, ruin. It matters little whether it is the Lancashire manufacturer or the great mill owner of Bombay who successfully contests the village weaver's market.

Men will do more for a sentiment or an ideal than they will for a material advantage. But the sentiment must be real and definite. At present it is the weakness of the Swadeshi movement that the arguments put forward in favour of it so often appeal to a purely material ideal of prosperity. I have sought in vain for any expression in Swadeshi writings of a primary desire to make goods more useful or more beautiful than those imported, or to preserve for the country any art, qua art, and not merely as an industry. Indeed, such statements can be found, but they have come from the mouths not of nationalists, but of Imperialists like Sir George Birdwood, and Lord Curzon!

In India the primary aim of at least a certain section of the Nationalist party, has been to compete with Europe in cheapness. But the idea of learning just enough of Western science or Western manufacturing methods to be able to undersell the imports at any given moment is as delusive as it is mean. Some more constructive aims and methods are needed if Indian manufactures are to recover their lost status, and if India is to avoid even some of the horrors associated with modern industrial production in the West.

Do not then let us compete with Western Nations by evolving for ourselves a factory system and a capitalist ownership of the means of production corresponding to theirs. Do not let us toil through all the wearisome stages of the industrial revolution—destruction of the guilds, elimination of small workshops, the factory system, laissez faire, physical degeneration, hideousness, trusts, the un-employed and unemployable, and whatever may be to follow. We may perhaps not think of these things now, we may be too much concerned with the political problems of to-day. But if we are wise, we, who want India to be free, must bethink ourselves that, when that freedom comes, these problems will be with us still; the possibility of their solution depends on foresight and wisdom now. The history of the industrial revolution in Europe has been a long and sad one, and only now, and slowly, are some of its worst results being recognized, and their remedy devised. That this industrial revolution was in a sense inevitable may be granted, and it may also be that at least the

outlines of it must be imposed upon the development of the social organism in the East as well as in the West; and indeed, not only in Japan, but also in India we see the process already at work. But it is probably possible for Eastern nations to run through some of its stages quickly,and with the experience of other nations as their guide, to avoid some of the worst evils. The Japanese, who are sometimes as much in advance of Europe as India is behind it, have shown, in spite of the great disorganization and vulgarisation of their national life that has taken place already, some signs of this pre-vision. In 1885 the Japanese Government arranged for the establishment of silk-guilds by the local authorities; one of their chief functions was to preserve the standard of production. There are nearly 129 such guilds at present It is also stated, says Mr. Havell, in the Indian Trade Journal of February 16, 1907, that the Japanese, in preparing to compete with European nations for commercial prosperity, are showing a distinct reversion to former ways and methods; amongst other things steps were being taken to reorganise the old trade guilds. The Trade Journal ' comments: “As the various Guilds grow in power and influence they will be able to dictate to European and American traders, unless the latter also enter into combination."

It is absolutely necessary for Swadeshi in India to be a foresighted and constructive movement if it is to be of ultimate and real benefit to the Indian people. The gaining of a temporary trade advantage, though valuable as a political weapon to-day, is a small matter compared with the ultimate development of Indian society.

It is true that there exist the germs of regeneration in the West; the ideals of democracy and socialism (equality of opportunity) must sooner or later be in some measure attained; and a time will come again, or the hopes of civilisation are vain indeed, when there will be for all men, work worth doing, a life not over-hard or over-anxious, and such surroundings as are fit for human beings. We are little in touch with these regenerative tendencies. It does not even follow that the situation must be saved for us in just the same way. But many of these ideals were already attained under the industrial systems prevailing in India. Each caste or trade possessed an organisation largely socialistic in character and embodying democratic and communistic ideals. It may well be doubted whether the true hope for Indian industry does not lie in some such developments of the caste system itself, in the village industries of the past, aided by such improvements as are needed (e. g. the fly-shuttle or the distribution of electric power).

No doubt a great many common things must be made by machinery in future ; and it may even be that a time will come when machinery will be actually used as a labour saving, and not as a profit making device ; but it is probable that men will not ultimately rely nearly as much upon machinery as is supposed ; and where they must, or at any rate now do so, we may for the present very well leave other nations to do such hewing of wood and drawing of water for us, and concern ourselves with the revival, both for our own use and for export, of what are really our own industries, now decaying everywhere for lack of intelligent encouragement.

Not infrequently the Swadeshi cry is an exhortation to self-sacrifice. It seems to me that this is an entirely false position. It is never worth while in the long run putting up with second best. Swadeshi for the very poor may mean a real sacrifice of money. But how far this is really the case is very doubtful. If one should regard a standard of simple living, conditioned by quality rather than quantity of wants, where durability of materials was preferred to cheapness alone, it is fairly certain that even the peasant

would be better advised to use (real) Swadeshi than foreign goods. And for those better off, for those who have adopted pseudo-European fashions and manners to talk of Swadeshi as a sacrifice is cant of the worst description. It implies entire ignorance of India's achievement in the industrial arts, and an utter lack of faith in India. The blindest prejudice in favour of all things Indian were preferable to such condescension as that of one who casts aside the husks and trappings of modern luxury, to accept the mother's exquisite gifts as a ' sacrifice.'

Not till the Indian people patronize Indian arts and industries from a real appreciation of them, and because they recognize them not merely as cheaper, but as better than the foreign, will the Swadeshi movement become complete and comprehensive. If a time should ever come—and at present it seems far off—when Indians recognize, that "for the beautification of an Indian house of the furniture of an Indian home there is no need to rush to European shops in Calcutta or Bombay," there may be a realisation of Swadeshi. But “so long as they prefer to fill their palaces with flaming Brussels Carpets, Tottenham-court-road furniture, cheap Italian mosaics, French oleographs, Austrian lustres, German tissues and cheap brocades there is not much hope." When will Indians make it possible for an enemy to throw in their teeth a reproach so true as this?

Even more important, then, than the establishment of new industries on Indian soil, are the patronage and revival of those on the verge of extinction, the purification of those which survive in degraded forms, and the avoidance of useless luxuries, whether made in India or not. Swadeshi must be inspired by a broad and many sided national sentiment, and must have definitely constructive aims;- where such a sentiment exists, Industrial Swadeshi will be its inevitable outcome without effort and without failure.