

Sri Aurobindo's notion of Boycott and its Spiritual Implication

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Abstract

Sri Aurobindo's theory of Boycott is very important not only in the context of Indian politics but also to understand the inherent salient feature of Indian independence movement taken place in the pre-independent India. His theory concerning boycott has five counterparts, namely economic boycott, educational boycott, administrative boycott, judicial boycott and social boycott, to convey the uniqueness. Sri Aurobindo discovered the spiritual implication behind this theory of boycott which conveys the uniqueness of his thesis. To him the word 'boycott' spiritually stands as a means to preach for Zeitgeist both in the form of Kali and Krishna unlike Bankim. His thesis of boycott is commonly misinterpreted as an act of violence but Sri Aurobindo compared it with an act of self-preservation of the Kshatriya. The way of boycott is somewhat similar with concept of svadharma of the Kshatriya. The political battle of boycott seemed necessary to him for bringing the desired Indian independence. In this way the spiritual sense of boycott becomes inseparable with its political sense to Sri Aurobindo.

Keywords: Sri Aurobindo, Boycott, Spiritual implication, politics, Indian independence movement.

Introduction

In the social-political theory of Sri Aurobindo *swaraj* seems to be the path mandatory for transforming a common life into the Life Divine and boycott remains as one of its important corollaries. In his spiritual dream of fulfilling the union, i.e. the *swaraj* with the Divine, he had taken the political path as he truly realized that for making the country wholly prepared for this spiritual destination, the first priority must be the attainment of its political freedom. Political liberty, in his opinion, serves as the gateway of achieving the spiritual liberty. He had a firm belief over India's spiritual excellence and for making India, the mother-land as the spiritual guide of all other spiritually backward nations it has to be freed from the shackles of its political servitude. Boycott is actually treated as an excellent weapon in this regard. A boycott is generally an act of voluntary abstaining from using, buying or dealing with a person, organization or nation as an expression of protest against any kind of exploitation, usually for political reasons. It can be used in the local, provincial, national as well as international context of politics. Local to international politics can be affected by the good as well as the bad sides of boycott. Before India, the Europe was quite accustomed with such use of boycott in the political context. However this chapter will concentrate on the concept of boycott as found in the social-political thought of Sri Aurobindo.

Meaning of Boycott:

The term 'boycott' entered into the dictionary of politics following the name of Captain Charles Boycott, the land agent of a landlord, Lord Erne, who lived in Count Mayo of Ireland in 1880. As the condition of harvest had been very poor those days, Lord Erne offered his tenants a ten percent reduction in their rents instead of their demand of twenty-five percent. Boycott then, unable to succumb the situation, attempted to evict eleven tenants from the land to broke the backbone of the peasants. But the result was devastating. The situation became worse as Boycott soon found himself isolated – his workers stopped working in fields and home; local businessmen stopped working in the fields; and even the local postmen refused to deliver his mails. Within weeks Boycott's name became famous everywhere. It was used by *TheTimes* in November, 1881 as a term for organized form of isolation.¹ However after that incident, the term 'Boycott' got acquainted in the international politics. Montgomery bus boycott, the successful Jewish boycott organized against Henry Ford in USA in the 1920, the boycott of Japanese products in China after the May Fourth movement, the Arab League boycott of Israel and other companies trading with Israel etc are some of the most popular instances of boycott in international politics. However in the context of Indian politics for discovering the first advocator of the term 'boycott' we have to follow Haridas Mukherjee and Uma Mukherjee who

¹ Singh, Karan, *Prophet of Indian Nationalism*, p. 120 (in the footnote)

in their book *India's Fight for Freedom* gave the credit to Tahal Ram Ganga Ram as the first advocator of boycott in early 1905.²

Aurobindo's notion of Boycott:

In Sri Aurobindo's opinion there are five different categories of Boycott³ – (i) Economic Boycott; (ii) Educational Boycott; (iii) Judicial Boycott; (iv) Administrative Boycott and (v) Social Boycott.

Economic Boycott:

Industrial boycott is another name for economic boycott. The British merchants, who were responsible for the economic exploitation of India before independence, needed to be stopped at that time. As a result British goods were to be boycotted by Indians so that the Indian local merchants could promote their *swadeshi* industries. This was known as the Economic or Industrial Boycott. The economic boycott is meant for boycotting British goods so that the foreign merchants fail to exploit the Indian merchants and small traders. The British people are mainly known as the merchant race. The main aim of the British government behind making India as one of its colonies, like America, was to exploit its richness. In the start, the British people like Dutch and French merchants concentrated just on trading Indian goods on foreign merchants. Raw materials in India were very cheap, so they bought those materials at cheaper rates from India; exported them to England to make good quantity of goods made from them, and then exported them back in India and other foreign markets to sell these goods at higher rates. However clothes, sugar, indigo, etc. goods were indeed produced in India and sold in other foreign markets openly by the British merchants. For this reason the clothes made in Manchester and imported to India were higher in cost for the common Indian masses. These goods were, thus, made available only to British officials and Indian elite class. Hence the urge for economic boycott of foreign goods is just a time-bound incident. On August, 1905, at the Calcutta Town Hall this resolution of economic boycott was taken by the intellectuals and common Indians. Its effect was tremendous over the British administration. Actually the true founder of Gandhi's boycott-*swadeshi* thesis was none other than Sri Aurobindo himself. The boycott movement of Non-Independent India was based on two major inferences – firstly, the British rule in India was mainly dependent on its economy which came out of gradual exploitation of India; and secondly, by boycotting the British goods Indians could be able to give a devastating blow over the British economy. Eventually both of them were quite relative to each other, because if the

² Mukherjee, Haridas and Uma Mukherjee, *India's Fight for Freedom or The Swadeshi Movement (1905-1906)*, p. 33

³ Sri Aurobindo, *Bande Mataram*, "The Doctrine of Passive Resistance: Its Methods", p. 102

Indian economy was exploited by the British people then by boycotting their goods we can fetch back the golden era of the early India.⁴

An important corollary of economic boycott *isswadeshi* i.e. encouraging the development of national goods manufactured in any part of India. So, not only the negative side of Boycott, but also its positive side was developing gradually. So boycott is not only used to hamper the British rule, but also to develop Indian industries by promoting Indian goods. Thus from Karan Singh's writings, we can find out that Boycott has two great objectives hidden behind it. The first is to shake the foundations of British power in India; and the second is to bring about a rapid growth in indigenous industries for producing goods required by its own people. In this way, the economic resurgence of the nation would be possible.⁵

Educational Boycott:

Educational boycott, just in the same way as above, is the rejection of the British system of education while trying to reconstruct the overall educational system of India in a new way. The basis of educational boycott had a deep impact upon the Indian educational system. When the East India Company managed to become the ruler of India, they tried hard impulsively to destroy the educational system of India which was one important source of India's greatness. Indian traditional *Tol* system and *Maktab* or *Madrasas* was the cause of enlightenment among its countrymen before the British era. But after the arrival of British people in India the main focus shifted towards the making of educated clerks who would help the British rulers to rule over entire India with their support. In the changing political arena of India, the British government wanted to make some obedient native 'babus', local 'zamindars', provincial 'rajahs' to give them safe-guard against the rage of the Indian masses. In the regime of Lord Curzon in 1902, the Indian Universities Commission published its *Report* along with a note of dissent by Gooroo Das Banerjee, its only Hindu member then. On the basis of this majority report, the Government passed the Indian Universities Act in 1904. The whole report and the Act led to a keen spurt in public interest regarding the problem of education, and to the establishment of the 'Dawn Society' in 1902 by Satish Chandra Mukherjee. The 1904, Indian University Act demanded selfless obedience from its students. By this the act meant that, they should not be indulged into any kind of furious political agitation. They had to concentrate solely in their studies. It is in this context that we can discover the phrase '*chatranamadhayanamtapa*' from our ancient scriptures. However the students had nothing to interfere in the ongoing political turmoil of India after 1905. Students were banned to join any political agitation; they were not permitted to meet any political leader or to utter anything about politics openly. If they broke the governmental rules, then the government had enough reasons to imprison them. This barbarous act of 1904 was

⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Speeches*, "Graduated Boycott", p. 293-294

⁵ Singh, Karan, *The Prophet of Indian Nationalism*, p. 124

capable enough to raise the fury of Indian masses. The political leaders were not in the mood to let go this golden opportunity and in this context included Indian students as an inevitable part of politics. In this way educational boycott i.e. to boycott the British educational system became a craze among pupils. Many of them refused to take foreign degrees and so the effect of educational boycott seemed all-pervading across Indian students. However in Karan Singh's analysis, the partition of Bengal in 1905 was marked as an immensely important political incidence for the upsurge of anti-British feeling and agitation throughout the India. Then the cry of boycott and *swadeshi* spread like wild fire.⁶ Its effect was seen prominently in the educational field, and educational boycott became an important part in the political programme of the new Nationalist party. In this political context of India, Sri Aurobindo, the first Principal of the Bengal National College, tried to reconstruct the national educational system by reuniting the glory of past with the scientific methods of the present so that it could lead us to a splendidly extraordinary future. In 1918, Tagore also established Sriniketan, for the same reason, which later took the form of today's Visva-Bharati University.

Judicial Boycott:

Judicial boycott is another very well-known form of boycott. British judicial system was another symbol of their tyrannical rule over India and its masses before independence. The foreign government was never in favor of tolerating the political upsurge of India. So the British rulers used the judicial system as a part of its dominative machinery. Whenever Indian people tried to focus on their political urge for independence, the British constituency used their judicial system as a weapon against them. The immediate result was the hangings of Maharaja Nandakumar and Khudiram; followed by the suicide of Prafulla Chaki and many more. Entire India became furious against the British domination. Several revolutionary groups were formed and revolutionary activities increased in Bengal, Punjab and Maharashtra. Among them Anushilan Samiti was founded by Pramathanath Mitra in 1902, Jugantar Dal was formed as one of its important corollary, Gadar party was established by Lala Hardayal and Ajit Singh, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar took a part in Tilak's Swaraj Party etc., gained their popularity among Indians. To stop them the British judges, as a part of dominative British administration, helped the government by giving judgments in their favor. They gave heavy punishments to Indian people even for smallest faults. The deportation of Lala Lajpat Rai, 'Bande Mataram' newspaper case, Alipore Bomb case and Sri Aurobindo's one year imprisonment are the prominent instances of the tortures of the British judicial system. Thus judicial boycott seemed mandatory in the pre-independent India after 1905.⁷ Indian political leaders understood the necessity of establishing the national arbitration court. However this dream was never fulfilled as the Indians

⁶Singh, Karan, *The Prophet of Indian Nationalism*, p. 128

⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *Bande Mataram*, "The Doctrine of Passive Resistance", p. 38

did not gain enough courage to establish supplementary judicial machinery against that of the British judicial system.

However from Sri Aurobindo's own view it can be proved that this notion of Judicial Boycott was not paid much attention as compared to swadeshi and national education. It failed to achieve the settled goal because of two essential reasons – first, it was not at all possible to replace the supremely powerful British judicial system; and secondly, there was actually no need of replacing the old system as the British judiciary was devoid of any charge of partiality against their Indian counter-parts. The proper example of British Justice was perhaps Sri Aurobindo himself who in the able advocacy of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das escaped from suffering a long punishment by transforming it into only one year's imprisonment in the Alipore Conspiracy Case. Perhaps one can consider this theory, for this reason, as the weakest thesis among Sri Aurobindo's entire notion of Boycott.

Administrational Boycott:

The British administration played a major role to sustain the tyrannical rule over India for two long decades. The foreign rulers used its executive part to torture Indian masses. The inhuman torture over Sushil Kumar; the suicide of Prafulla Chaki and the hanging of Khudiram Bose in the offence of killing Mrs. Kennedy with her daughter; the sacrifice of lives of Bagha Jatin and his gangs; the hanging of Masterda Surya Sen were among the many evidences of British tyrannical rule over India. All of these incidents arouse limitless anger among the Indian masses. The domination of British rule never ended up with such sad incidents and its degree increased randomly. A successful administration has to unite its rulers with the subordinates. But the British executive rule had no connection with its people. So this dominative rule had to be soon ended and the Indian political atmosphere after 1905 also indicated towards the gradual downfall of the British empire. Being fed up with the crude and intolerable Executive administration of the British rulers, Sri Aurobindo advocated for the organized form of Bureaucratic Administrative Boycott i.e. Executive Boycott. Actually the boycott of the foreign rule was meant for boycotting its executive part. The misbehavior of the police and the executive department over the common Indians led Sri Aurobindo to draw such analysis.⁸

The Indian political leaders truly realized the necessity of establishing the national organization by whose help India could end the tyrannical foreign empire ruling of two decades. For the above stated reason Satish Chandra Mukherjee formed the Dawn Society in 1902; Tilak formed Swaraj party; Pramathanath Mitra formed Anushilan Samiti in 1902 and Jugantar Dal also developed as its corollary. However the Indian National Congress got the reputation of a

⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *BandeMataram*, "The Doctrine of Passive Resistance", p. 38

recognized national organization only after the appearance of Gandhi in the political arena of India.

Actually non-payment of taxes was the most effective and tremendously popular among other forms of executive boycott. In the opinion of Sri Aurobindo, by paying taxes citizens directly assist the administration and thus the non-payment of taxes directly hamper the executive activities of the foreign rule and in this way our goal of executive boycott would become possible in reality.

Social Boycott:

Sri Aurobindo, being much more advanced from his age, also mentioned about social boycott. Social boycott signified not just to boycott the foreign administrators, but also their supporter *desi Babus* even from attending any social occasion. Social boycott theory is perhaps much more effective as compared with others because nothing could affect the British dynasty more than it. The concept of social boycott is much easier than other kinds of boycott. The foreign administrators and the English-minded 'babus' had to be socially boycotted for their attitude towards 'native' Indians. They actually helped the British dynasty to sustain over India for two long decades. They were therefore boycotted from attending meetings, ceremonies etc. They were also banned from social gatherings. Participation in any meeting or agitation was strictly prohibited for them. In this way guilty feelings could be aroused amongst and within them as no direct violence towards enemy was allowed here. In social boycott, no physical harm was to be done to our opponents, rather mental pressure was to achieve results.

Karan Singh explored this idea of Social Boycott as very simple in nature where the offender is to be shunned socially, in parties, festivals, weddings and so on. He is to be made to feel the scorn and contempt of his fellow-countrymen due to his anti-national activities. A great advantage of the social boycott was that it did not involve any direct clash with the law or resort to violence.⁹

However the necessity of social boycott became visible in Sri Aurobindo's own opinion: 'Whereas passive resistance has been accepted, the necessity of the social boycott has been recognised as its natural concomitant. "Boycott foreign goods and boycott those who use foreign goods" must be accepted by all who are in earnest. For without this boycott of persons of things cannot be effective; without the social boycott no national authority depending purely on moral pressure can have its decrees effectively executed; and without effective boycott enforced by a strong national authority the new policy cannot succeed'.¹⁰ Thus among all forms of boycott

⁹ Singh, Karan, *The Prophet of Indian Nationalism*, p. 138

¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Bande Mataram*, "The Doctrine of Passive Resistance", p. 58

social boycott seems much more crucial than others as it brings instant success while others bring gradual change.

Spiritual Implication of Boycott:

This movement had a spiritual implication hidden behind. Nationalism was itself compared with the worship of goddess *Kali*. *Kali* was accepted as a symbol of the motherland and hence nationalism seems to the nationalists as nothing else than the worship of their Mother Nation. Thus Bankim's *Bhārat-mātā* and Sri Aurobindo's motherland is not different than *Kali*. However, if we go deeply, then we can discover that in Sri Aurobindo's interpretation this *śakti* is the mother-nature or *Zeitgeist* who can be *Kali* and *Krishna* both unlike Bankim.

Sri Aurobindo considered *Zeitgeist* is the mutual form of *Kali* and *Krishna* both. In his famous *UttarparaSpeech* he depicted the clear picture of his realization about the existence of Vasudeva among all. At the time of his confinement in Alipore jail he experienced *Krishna* in every living and non-living creatures.¹¹ This manifestation of *Krishna* is like his *Lila* in Sri Aurobindo's view.

But what could be the reason behind such realization? In his book *TheIdealoftheKarmayogin* Sri Aurobindo compared the all-pervasiveness of God with that of time.¹² Time is omnipotent and omniscient, so is God. Hence *Brahman* is none the less than time himself. Let me quote *Gita* to explain it. In *Gita* Sri Krishna told Arjuna –

Kalo'smilokakṣayakṛtpravṛddholokansamāhartumihapravṛttah.

Rt'pivāmnabhaviṣyantisarveye'vasthitāhpratyanīkeṣuyodhāh ||¹³

[I (Sri Krishna) am Time who waste and destroy the peoples; I have arisen in my might; I am here to swallow up the nations. Even without me all they shall not be, I even exist in between the men standing in the opposite squadrons.]

Hence from this above we can derive that *Brahman*, according to Sri Aurobindo, was manifested in the form of *Krishna*. In this way Sri Aurobindo took *zeitgeist* in the form of *Krishna*. [*Zeitgeist* as Time/*Kala* = *Krishna*]

However *Zeitgeist*, according to Sri Aurobindo, can appear in the form of *Kali* also.¹⁴ *Kali*, in his view, is not compared with Time as *Krishna*, but she is carrying time as her tools to create,

¹¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Speeches*, "Uttarpara Speech", p. 78-79

¹² Sri Aurobindo, *TheIdealoftheKarmayogin*, "The Greatness of the Individual", p. 56-57

¹³ Sri Aurobindo, *TheIdealoftheKarmayogin*, "The Greatness of the Individual", p. 56

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 59

sustain and destroy her foes so that she could fulfill her aim. From his description it cannot be illogical to draw that the power of Kali as *Aghaṭṇa-ghaṭana-patīyasī* (the person who can make possible even impossible) is beyond the limit of time. Her power actually supersedes time. Time is just a power in the hands of Kali. When we accept *Zeitgeist* in this sense then we will certainly accept him in the form of Kali. Even in his *BhawaniMandirManifesto* Sri Aurobindo clearly mentioned that Bhawani could be known as Kali, the goddess of pure *śakti* (“the Mother is manifested as the mother of Strength. She is pure Shakti.”¹⁵). She has nested her responsibility on the shoulders of her devotees to make India free. [*Zeitgeist* as *Mahakala* = Kali]

In this above way boycott agitation stood in the sense of the worship of *zeitgeist* in the form of Kali and Krishna both.

Conclusion: Boycott & Violence:

Some critics can argue that social boycott being non-violent in nature may be justifiable, but not burning or drowning British goods in the name of Industrial Boycott along with other forms of boycott. However Sri Aurobindo conceived the other kinds of boycott, except the social boycott, not as morally unjustifiable, even though illegal from the judicial and administrative context. In its response he clearly declared that – ‘The morality of a Kshatriya justifies violence in times of war, and boycott is a war...Aggression is unjust only when unprovoked; violence, unrighteous when used wantonly or for unrighteous ends.’¹⁶ Thus according to Sri Aurobindo one has to be as courageous and as brave as the *Kshtriya*. A true *Kshtriya* never gives up. He can even sacrifice his own life in the battle field. He can never even think to quit from it, even though the battle seems very much tough in nature, and boycott is nothing else but a strong battle by whose help one can gain one’s independence or *swaraj*. Thus no question of quitting from the battle-field seems relevant here in this context. It is like the *svadharma* of the *Kshatriya* where he should take part to prevent *varṇasaṅkara*. Everybody should achieve the morality of the *Kshatriyas*; so that the use of violence would not be able to break up the firmness of one’s mind and one can, being prepared in that way, be able to go ahead in the path of achieving national freedom, wherever the question of violence seems inappropriate and inapplicable. Boycott is a battle, and in battle-field the question of violence or non-violence is unnecessary. However, one cannot even have enough freedom to quit the battle of boycott as he is not the doer, but just the instruments or tools used by. God himself is the doer, and uses humans as equipments for such a devastating war.

What is the need of such battle? In *Gita*, Lord *Krishna* himself preaches the great war of *Kurukshetra* as it seems mandatory for the well-being of India and its countrymen. Thus,

¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *BandeMataram*, “Bhawani Mandir”, p. 61

¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *BandeMataram*, “The Morality of Boycott”, p. 127

according to Sri Aurobindo, the battle of *swadeshi* and boycott agitation also seems necessary as per God's wish. Hence whatever has been done in the pre-Independence age in India is all due to the Supreme Command of the Almighty. We, the common Indians, become proud of being liberated from the hands of the British domination; even though the achievement of Indian independence in 1947 happens only due to the master plan of the Divine and also whatever we have lost and whatever we have gained in the name of boycott agitation at the time of Indian independence from 1905 to 1947, has also been done according to the divine will. Thus, whatever had been done at the time of India's political movement before 1947 was not according to the free will of any human being, rather according to the supreme will of the *Brahman*. Boycott, in his view, stands as following one's own *svadharma*. Thus whatever we have to do in the name of boycott agitation stands as a part of the Divine plan by Sri Aurobindo. Actually behind every theory of Sri Aurobindo the metaphysical touch is prevalent. His social-political thought is not at all an exception in this regard and boycott as one of his most important political tool has to be allied with this inner metaphysical touch hidden behind.

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