

THEMES OF WOMANHOOD IN THE ICON OF BHARAT MATA

Dr. Suresh Chand

Associate Professor, Department of History,
K.G.K. (P.G.) College, Moradabad (U.P.)

Abstract:

The paper is an insightful history of Bharat Mata (Mother India) and attempts to explore its gradual evolution and significance in India's nationalist movement which was born out of the patriotic fervor of Indian nationalist leaders. The female portrayal was much more than presentation on a map because it was valued as a sacred entity by the people. This paper will try to analyze the cartographic features associated with Bharat Mata's figure: saree, lion, flag and others along with the metamorphization of the gentle ascetic figure of Bharat Mata into a warrior of ultra-nationalism and the different ways in which the icon is looked at by scholars.

Key Words:

Bharat Mata, nationalism, ascetic, mother-goddess, British colonialism, feminine

INTRODUCTION

The idea of worshipping *Prithvi* or earth has been a part of Hinduism since ancient times.¹ Bharat Mata first appeared in a work by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in the 1870s but the painting known to us today is the work of Abanindra Nath Tagore in 1904. Bharat Mata, also known as Mother India in English, is the personification of our country, Bharat, as a mother goddess. In ancient Indian literature, the mother and the motherland were given an even higher status than heaven but in modern India, this idea first appeared in Bengal when Kali and Durga were worshipped as popular goddesses in the celebrated Bengali novel, *Anandmath* (1882) in which Bankim Chandra represented her in the form of a Hindu goddess Durga and Kali.

The figure received wider notice after the division of Bengal province in 1905 when the concept of Swadeshi ideals was running larger in the independence movement. In Tagore's work, Bharat Mata is clad in a saffron-coloured saree and holding a book, sheaves of paddy, a white cloth and a rosary. These multiple objects are associated with Indian culture which was being painted in response to the boycotting of British goods and institutions in the background of the partition of Bengal in 1905.

The exploration of this 'icon-ising' i.e. an act of transforming the idea into an image or icon that a nation and its community can identify with will be an integral part of the paper.

AN INSIGHT

Jayanta Sengupta, who is the curator of Indian museum in Kolkata, characterizes the painting as "an attempt of humanisation of 'bharat mata' where the mother is seeking liberation through her sons".

The work of Sumathi Ramaswamy, an eminent historian remains significant in this aspect. In 'The Goddess and the Nation, Mapping Mother', he has shown how the image of Bharat Mata has been reimagined over the years, from being an ascetic, benign figure to a ultra-nationalist warrior. Ramaswamy points out that in mass-produced calendar images, the figure of Bharat Mata was vivid, with flowing saree and carried arms supported by roaring lions unlike the sadhvi image of Abanindranath Tagore's painting. He also shows that the artists cleverly included contested parts of the land such as Kashmir in the geo-body of Bharat Mata.²

Indian mythology supports the viewpoint of earth being the producer of life and its sustainer and is thus called *Bhudevi*, the mother goddess. In the literature by Indian thinkers and politicians, India is referred to as a nurturing mother as one can see in the writings of Jawaharlal Nehru and V.D.Savarkar.³

Various temples have been constructed and dedicated to Bharat Mata, the first such being at Benaras which enshrines the map of India in place of a goddess image.

Karan Gabriel, in his work argues about the elitist and highly exclusive nature of the figure of Bharat Mata. He is critical about the all-representative nature of the icon, as India, Gabriel mentions, is mainly the peasants and the workers and not beautiful to look at like the mother goddess which is suggestive of the social and cultural hierarchies of caste, class and religious majoritarianism being promoted through this iconisation.

She is bound by material structures of gender, religion, caste, class and status, all of which act as representative of discrete sets of material and ideological practices.⁴

The figure is intensively generative of passion being both a mother and a goddess and there is a deliberate coincidence between the landmass of the nation and the body of Bharat Mata which encloses the Indian territory.

WOMANHOOD THEMES

The painting is an appeal to the Indian heart. The anthropomorphic body of the divine mother was entangled with the map or territory of the nation. The novel, *Anandmath*, the celebrated work of Bankim Chandra, composes the politics of Hindu nationhood. It embodies a sacred presence in the form of a dominant image of the mother goddess. Sarkar mentions that Bankim, in his novel, now imagined a deliberately holy war against Britishers, not fought by royal armies but ascetics, giving entry to a new commitment of pure patriotism in the form of devotion to the motherland.⁵ She is an imperial figure, trampling over enemies with remarkable features of might and glory. Bankim is given the credit of inventing this "goddess" but in contrast to Hindu devotionism (*Jagaddhatri*- food giver, *Kali- Shakti* of destructive force and *Durga*- the demon slayer), the Goddess of motherland has no mythology or life events of her own. This will also lead to breakdown of gender boundaries.

Even the nationalists were forced to face the question of gender. The orientalist otherization of the colonial subject (Said, 1978) created a narrative of colonial masculinity and colonized male effeminacy. In the outside political world, the Indian male figure was to meet and challenge the colonial narrative of effeminacy by matching modes of aggressiveness and masculinity but the realm of home as Chatterjee (1989) argues becomes a site of preserving essential spiritual qualities of national culture. Chatterjee says that this was done through the construction of a 'new woman' who was culturally refined, spiritual and essentially different from the 'common woman'. There started a marked difference in the essence and domain of men and women: man would work in the outer sphere based on dominant principles of masculinity and woman would rule the inner sphere displaying the cultural, spiritual essence of the nation. It was at this juncture that the nationalist also felt the need to produce a "nation idea" based on a principle different from the west and the one which will develop its own narrative of cultural essentialism and spirituality. Thus, the male figure needs to be cast as the material actor (son/savior) of the nation and the feminine figure needs to be cast as the spiritual and unchanging nation. This image needed to be spread in order to develop a 'national consciousness'.⁶ This visual icon (Davis, 2007) irrespective of literacy or language barriers allowed all people to associate themselves with that icon which represented a particular imagination of the nation.

Bharat Mata is the image of national culture as a feminine and spiritual entity. It is a symbolic fiction that covers itself in the veil of Hindu antiquity but produced by a modern imagination and spread or disseminated through modern means.⁷ Hindu nationalists successfully managed to render it a ‘symbol of militant Hindu nationalism’.⁸

For Tanika Sarkar (2010), the first cultural artifact through which the Bharat Mata iconography develops is the concept of *Desh Mata* (motherland) which became widespread in Bengal during the later half of nineteenth century as the embodiment of Mother Goddess and latest in the pantheon of Hindu female deities. Sarkar feels that the need to return to the past implies a need to return to a state of innocence and infancy where the child is undifferentiated from the mother, the nation land.

Kiran Chandra Bandopadhyay has written a play named “Bharat Mata” in which Bharat Mata occupies the space of a grieving, sorrowful and suffering mother reflecting the distress of its people. Bharat Mata is shown as “Adi-Bharati”, the widow of Arya Swami in Bhudeb Mukopadhyay’s satirical piece, *Unabhimsa Purana* or the nineteenth purana i.e. as the embodiment of all that is essentially ‘Aryan’.⁹ According to Ramaswamy (2005), Mukopadhyay turned to the Puranas in which sati was scattered across 52 different places which became Hindu pilgrimage spots and thus brought all her sons (inhabitants) together who were born out of her womb.¹⁰

Bankim’s visualization of the mother embarks on a journey from the mother she was in the past to the mother she is in the present and transforming herself into the mother she will become in the future i.e. from Goddess Kali to the one who retains the power to transform herself into Goddess Durga with ten arms, powerful and mighty reflecting religious culture and widening its appeal.¹¹ This sentiment aroused by Bankim somehow reaffirmed her status as an ancient Goddess. All this connects it with the ‘Sanskritic Aryan Hindu life-world’ linked with the Hindu way of life. Ramaswamy also reaffirms the status of Bharat Mata as an ancient Hindu goddess. This figure with its authenticity that existed in the past provides power and strength to nationalism and gives its people a feeling of religiously infused nationalism to fight for its freedom and glory. In almost all ‘bodyscapes’, a term used by Sumathi Ramaswamy, Bharat Mata’s apparel with special emphasis on her sari plays a crucial role in producing and claiming national space. The roaring lion by her side is kicking the fairly large British crown and the darkness of colonialism has to give way to the new republican through the two sources of light in the icon- Bharat Mata’s halo and the fire burning on top of the Ashoka Pillar.¹²

Jha (2004) interprets Abanindranath Tagore’s visualization of Bharat Mata as an amalgamation of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and prosperity and Saraswati, goddess of

knowledge clad as a Vaishnava. It emphasizes the Hindu necessity of renouncement i.e. tyaga, here in relation to the imperialism of the western world. The painting indicates divinity which sets her apart from the common world or women in colonial India who were pale, tearful and frail. Rabindranath Tagore refers to her as an embodiment of shakti which represents power and fearful strength. He says- “Have I not told you that, in you, I visualize the shakti of our country..when I see you before me, then only do I realize how lovely my country is”.¹³

This ferocious representation of Bharat Mata as a deity flanked by lion, attired, adorned and armed is giving a call to her sons to fight in the nationalist movement against the british. This is also evident in the cover of *Bande Mataram*, a news magazine published in Geneva in which she is portrayed with a sword and reads the sentiment- “this war has offered itself to you as your duty..”.¹⁴

Brossius elaborates on the question of why this icon of Bharat Mata became so significant for the Hindutva ideology in India by mentioning that the narrative revolving around her made her an ideal figurine for Hindutva’s iconography of the nation state and her body and map became motifs for visualizing brotherhood responsible for protecting the mother.¹⁵ The icon is so captivating with its territorial representation in a way that her head is placed in Kashmir and borders which demarcate India from its neighbors are completely dissolved. The weapons display her destructive potential and her ferociousness infuses it masculine agency. Many scholars argue that these weapons carried by the mother goddess are not for herself but for her sons, highlighting the issue of anxiety over female militancy. This also takes us to the debate over female objectification with the argument that the woman appears as nation or mother and the man acts as her savior. It iconizes not just the nation but also its culture, patriarchies, its traditions and its pedigrees.

CONCLUSION

The cult of Bharat Mata was born out of the patriotic fervor during the Indian nationalist movement when the nationalist passion was transformed into an image of the nation as a mother. The painted deity stood for the self-sufficiency of the Indian nation in the making. The paper has explained the construction of this national identity along with the conceptual development of the icon in the form of an exclusive Hindu goddess underlining the theme of womanhood, divinity and the strategic function performed by it during the independence movement in India.

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