

Patriarchy in the garb of Patriotism – Exhuming the ensconced meaning in nationalism through Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Anandmath

Shivani Bhatt
PhD English, 2018
School of Letters
Ambedkar University of Delhi

Abstract

The paper seeks to explore the ramifications of nation on gender and identity in the Indian context through the late nineteenth and twentieth century i.e. the heyday of national consciousness. The paper seeks to explore the ramifications of nationalism on gender, religion and identity exploring through Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Anandmath. The paper tries to delve into and understand Bharat Mata as the symbol of exclusion than of inclusion and the maternal metaphor associated to nationhood as orchestrating the cultural predominance of the Hindu cult. The paper also looks at the gendered conception of nationalism - the attributes of Bharat Mata being the begetter of brave sons, guardian of Indian culture (read Hindu upper caste) came across as a regressive force, imposing the male generated conception of motherhood on all the women in India. The paper looks at the patriarchal undertones that the image of Bharat Mata carried in the social realm. Furthermore, the paper seeks to look at this sanctification of the sexualisation of the female body through images of the goddess nation, circumscribing the agency of Indian women.

Keywords: Nationalism, identity, Hindu nation, Bharat Mata, women

Introduction

The name “Bharat Mata” itself begets curiosity in the minds of the observer over the ambiguity of Indian nationalism. Allegorical representations of nations as woman began in eighteenth century wherein Germania of Germany and Marianne of France are viewed as warriors and protectors of national identities of these nations from the outsiders. The nationhood herein was defined by common language, ethnicity and culture constructed by homogenisation of population. In these countries, using Foucauldian concept of “governmentality” manifested in the form of nationhood which preceded the state formation. European governmentality was characterised by existence of “nation state” (Foucault 1991). Indian case is rather unique. Indian subcontinent comprised of diversities of language, religion, ethnicity and culture. Indian nationalist leaders borrowed western concepts of social organisation namely nation state, utilitarianism and liberalism to weaponise their fight against imperialism. Colonial

governmentality instead of homogenising Indian masses into a nation to finally deliver the promise of civilising mission - reaffirmed the diversity by building its governmentality on recognising primordial categories of caste and religion. Indian nationalism was based on opposition to this colonial difference (Chatterjee 1994) which was inimical to liberalism and to counter divide and rule based colonial difference, the concept of nationhood was borrowed, an ideal of Indian nation was constructed which celebrated its existence in the form of Indian civilisation existing in the holy texts of Indian civilisation. The female allegory which came attached to this concept came to be known as *Bharat Mata*.

Allegorical representations from the West

Unlike Germania and Marianne which represented the collective ethos of the entire German and French nation, Bharat Mata corresponded more with the Hindu nation state propagated by Hindu Mahasabha and RSS. Bharat Mata unlike her European counterparts marked inter-cultural fractures instead of unification. Bharat Mata invoked the imagery of Hindu Goddess Durga draped in Traditional Hindu sari, seated on the lion constantly under threat from attack from Outsiders. Before 1947 it was British, post 1947 Muslims were categorised as such. Although Nehru linked this abstraction to the people in his most inclusive definition of Bharat Mata - but when this *Hinduised* personification became the mainstream via paintings and poems - it alienated certain sections of society. Bharat Mata became the symbol of exclusion than inclusion. In the social realm, Bharat Mata came to be chastised for carrying patriarchal undertones. The attributes of Bharat Mata being the begetter of brave sons, guardian of Indian (read Hindu upper caste) culture came across as regressive enforcing the male generated conception of motherhood on all the women in India thereby taking away the very agency for their self-definition and existence. The definition of the self was not an autonomous act rather was laid out in the imagery of Bharat Mata. The personification of Marianne empowered women by infusing them with warrior like qualities and mobilised masses under the idea of French nation. Bharat Mata on the other hand alienated various sections of the society along with subduing the agency of the women by creating an imagery of an ideal woman of the nation which all women being repositories of culture has to compulsorily follow.

Gendering nationalism

Fruzzetti & Perez (2002) argued that Gandhi believed in essential oneness of humanity, men and women could not be regarded as different in essence but on the other hand in his nationalist project for Independence women had a larger role both as symbols and makers of future nation. Women nature was personification of self-sacrifice, embodiment of silent suffering, ahimsa, on the whole a symbol of the nation of which the core was Hinduism. National movement in order to dismantle the colonial rule adopted feminized character in symbolism and its tone. Women purity was ascribed to the purity of the nation creating a cause worth laying lives for thereby resulting in feminisation of land and political action. Indian female exceptionalism and idea of purity was deployed by men including Gandhi not only to create political action and an idea of a nation but also altogether identity of Indian woman itself. Symbols like Vande Mataram meaning prayer to the mother and Bharat Mata were used.

Motherland of the farmers was transformed into Mother of the nation. Men also infused the resolution of women issues and liberation of women issues is linked with the liberation of Bharat Mata from the chains of colonialism. During the partition of Bengal in the air of revolt and dissent - Abanindranath Tagore's painting of Bharat Mata surfaced.

“The painting's central figure holds multiple items associated with Indian culture and the economy of India in the early twentieth century, such as a book, sheaves of paddy, a piece of white cloth and a garland. Moreover, the painting's central figure has four hands, evocative of Hindu imagery, which equates multiple hands with immense power.” (Dehejia 2017)

While mapping the maternal metaphor associated to nationhood, one can locate cultural predominance of Hindu cult in defining it and infusing it not only with an ideology of motherhood but also with moral fervour linking service to the nation being the service to the mother. The common mother of all Indians, Bharat Mata thus was created and represented differently in different scenario. Being embodiment of power (shakti) as durga and in some cases as tearful victim, frail widow asking her brave sons to rescue her from threats. The moods of Bharat Mata reflected the mood of the nation which was appropriated to mobilise the masses for a specific political objective. Map drawing cartography which was western exercise of demarcating boundaries inspired Indian nationalists to functionalise the mythology combining modernity with beliefs. The worship of Map of India as Bharat Mata in some places identified Hindu nationalism with the land of India, a fixed geographical territory. Mother as map of nation also was used to define political citizenry articulated as Male Hindus sons of the nation which comprised the ideal of India. Worshipping the map of India using Hindu symbols raised the question of space for Muslims in this map, a geographical territory worshipped as India or Bharat Mata. The religious dogma of Hinduism was thus converted into political rhetoric with place of worship of India as temple and vande matram as major hymn which alienated Muslims even further. (Gupta, 2001)

In '*Bharat Mata in shackles*' by D. Banerjee, 1941 goddess depicted as a tragedienne within the tumultuous national air with the earlier version of the national flag with Gandhi's charkha representing the Swadeshi Movement in India during the freedom struggle and its leaders in the background. This popular print which was disseminated across the nation for nationalist propaganda – the nationalism envisioned by the upper caste Hindu leaders of the Congress. Banerjee's painting of the saffron sari clad, benign Bharat Mata on the map of the India is the anthropomorphised mapping of a female body which of Sumathi Ramaswamy describes as “the national longing for cartographic form” - each nation's longing for inscribing a form to the contours of its boundaries. In the Indian context such it a double-edged sword, by making the goddess as a symbol for national mobilisation on one hand and on the other sanctification of the sexualisation of female bodies by lending the garb of the mother and this deification of the territory disregarded humanness to its inhabitants (read : female).

Abbey of bliss?

Prototypically, the concept of Mother Nation cementing the nation came from the most important books in Bengali literature and Indian Literature alike, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anand Math*. Set in the backdrop of the Famine of 1770 and The Sanyasi (ascetic) movement, the novel is lauded for the foremost imaginings of "Nation" as a mother. Captured by the song *Vande Matram*, (Victory to the Mother) Bankim Chandra Chatterjee exhorts the masses about Nationalism at a time when the ongoing nationalist movement suffered an eclipse. In the beginning of the novel, the spiritual guru Satyanand stumbles upon Kalyani and her girl child saving them from man hunters, the Guru becomes a refuge throughout to preserve the Nation's honour, its resources from getting pillaged by the British, and has an army of ascetic warrior men named Santans (children). Satyanand's mobilising of the Santans to action for saving the motherland from the fetters of the colonial rule was enmeshed with Swami Vivekananda's notion of the "warrior monks" as fighters protecting the Hindu nation with their moral and spiritual fortitude. The ascetic warriors of Chatterjee's novel donning the saffron robe of Hindu holy men remain pure, removing themselves from the temptation provided by female sexuality by not touching women or being alone with them. These warriors see their quest to free Mother India as spiritual and as informed by the religious tenets of Hinduism. (Banerjee 2012).

In Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's project then, the coalescing of athleticism and asceticism was to counter a sense of effemination of the Bengali natives under Britishers. The hegemonic sense of male Hindu cultural supremacy in the novel is represented by the character of the spirited Jivananda who breaks the conjugal ties, embracing celibacy in the service to the Mother Nation. He quintessentially fulfills the writer and the Guru's desire for a Hindu leader imbued with physical strength, untainted by female sexuality and capable of stimulating solidarity amongst other men for the larger cause of the Nation.

Feminists question whether the celibacy taken up by the men in the novel was an unacknowledged thrust upon the women characters. To set her husband free for the mother nation's service, Kalyani embraces death, yet she is saved by Bhabananda. The role of the gendered subject in this highly Nationalist novel is limited: the sacrifice of the mother daughter gives way to the homosocial bond between the sons. Kalyani, as a repository of the Indian tradition is revived not leaving behind the purpose for which she had embraced death - her body, her beauty being the object of desire by men, distracting and derailing the Nationalist spirit. Her beauty, sensually described by the infatuated Bhabananda compels him to leave behind his ascetic codes to marry her, which she firmly declines. Her death and rebirth in the background of the Nationalistic fervour is a way of showing how "women" must be redefined and reimaged to meet the requirements of the moment (Betty Joseph 2010). However, she is a foil to the character of the feisty Shanti, the wife of Jibananada. Shanti is a defiant one, not conforming to domestication, this hoyden orphaned child married to Jibananda, sees a progress not just as an individual but as a feminized self. However, her femininity is armed; her sexuality and later cross dressing make her sexuality ambiguous. In the film version the euphoria of the new nation comes through female characters, Shanti being the mainstay of it. She erases the outer order of femininity donning the male armour for fighting for the struggle for freedom. The novel is strikingly galvanising the role of women as countering the whole virile enterprise of the Nationalist sentiment. Though temporary, her act of opting into the phallic realm dissolves the

universalising theories of subject composition under Nationalism, as being a discourse of male militancy. In the episode where she contests with the British commander, she exposes and shames his weakness for women, emasculating him as a “militant”.

In the exchange where she is sent as a reconnoiter with the Englishmen, she as a Native woman is highly sexualised, on the other hand she hides the biological difference in camp of the Santas to facilitate the son’s desire for the Mother. The Santan- army displaying its enormous devotion to the Motherland is at the core of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s religious patriotism. The two protagonists are reminded by the respective women characters to foreground their selfless service towards the nation over and above everything, this is the central message the novel delineates. The glorification of the Nation as a mother and goddess, the “fertile woman” in the song Vande Mataram to the idols of – Jaggadhatari, Kali and Durga that Satyanand describes to Mahendra become ideational symbols, a woman typically not in the public sphere, the goddess’ body is represented in full splendour. It problematises the fact that : while an image whose non biological sons are selflessly devoted in her worship, the daughters in the material reality of things are subjugated under traditions and institutionalised patriarchy, her sons are torchbearers of. The whole concept of the sanctification of the sexualisation of female bodies by lending the garb of ‘The Mother’ and by deifying the territory disregarded humanness to its inhabitants (read: female). Rabindranath Tagore was first one to look through the religious stanzas of the song which he believed no Mussalman (Muslim) would chant and saw this as an obstacle to integration. In the novel more than the Britishers, the antagonist is the Muslim emperor Mir Zafar, consumed in alcohol and hedonic pleasures; he is the opposite of everything asceticism entails.

Cut to the present context, the novel’s propagation of Bharat Mata as the ultimate religion of the patriots holds true in a Nation witnessing the popularity of Hindu Nationalism. Anand Math becomes a protoform of Hindu Nationalism which the RSS with its reciting of “Bharat Mata” as a trumpet for its conception of a “Hindu Rashtra”. The recent feminists debates on this issue question how like sex and gender, the idea of a nation is merely “imagined”, it reinforces differences. Like language being highly phallogocentric, symbols too lead to "othering". Feminists have never required any special markers of identification like slogans; flags etc. beyond visible politics that brings Feminism closer to other movements of equality and freedom.

Gendering nationalism hence does the task of legitimising appropriation of women deities, mobilising women for nationalist struggle by linking their issues with those of colonialism along with discipline the sexuality of women in the hues of patriarchy all being tied to the noble end of liberation. The language as feminized deity thereby asserting goddess and other mythical figures served to provide the basis of new Indian nation. Indian women were “remade undernationalism” and after fulfilling the national mission, were restored to homes. Patriarchy made minor concessions for a national mission in which women were appropriated via symbols and language, divested from all sort of agency and manipulated to an end only to be reduced to the imminent subordinate position in the status quo after the goal has been achieved. Women in nationalist struggle came across as tools of political action denying any agency of them. Promise of national liberation didn’t fulfil the promise of women liberation. Coming back

to Gandhi who advocated for gender equality in the personal realm didn't quite back it up in the political realm. Action in one realm and suppression in other reflects the dual standards of Indian nationalist including Gandhi. The invention of new cultural fiction of "new women" which was the subject of reform of whose harbingers were men. All these was done to counter the colonial assertion that Indian women liberation is possible in British rule (abolition of sati) and regressive practices prevalent in India doesn't make it conducive for self-rule. One questions the very foundations of such assertions, in all of such countering -was the voice of women themselves anywhere heard? Were these subaltern figures under both colonialism and patriarchy marginalised only to be "protected" by both brown and white men?

In the reform movement, protection of women from western reforms became tantamount to protection of land and culture. The new women who was literate and had rights was not liberated rather appropriated in the cultural battle against Imperialism. Although they conceded reforms by themselves (resisting such from British side) Indian men were not ready to relinquish the overall structure of patriarchy. Reforms were to be carried to the likings of men which women for their inherent lack of "being" had no agency to initiate or resist. It is very legitimate to doubt the agency of Bharat Mata herself. Who made her, defined her, pasted the attributes and finally appropriated. The answer would be men.

Disintegration and aftermath

The communal and the gender angle merge in one of the most unfortunate events in history: the Partition of India. In a country where the woman figure was once revered to as a mother goddess ("Janni"- "Janma bhumi") turned into a demonic savage only by means of some artificially created boundaries. Questionably, was the vantage only a means of convenience - once to instil patriotism against the Britishers, and on another, defiling it on communal grounds? Most Partition literature traces the gruesome horror of the New Nation's development and the ravaging effects on women, who as emblems of society were ripped off their "honour" only as a means for avenging the larger honour of the Nation. In its very cradle, the newly formed nation witnessed barbarity and atrocity; from the same Motherland the conjoint tore off bonds and bodies.

Conclusion

In the present context, the propagation of Bharat Mata as the ultimate religion of the patriots holds true especially in a Nation witnessing the popularity of Hindu Nationalism. Anand Math becomes a protoform of Hindu Nationalism which the RSS with its reciting of "Bharat Mata" as a trumpet for its conception of a "Hindu Rashtra" (Hindu nation). The recent feminist debates on this issue question how - like sex and gender - the idea of a nation is merely "imagined"- it reinforces differences. Like language being highly phallogocentric, symbols too lead to "othering".

To sum up by Mary John's argument, the problematic with divinising the Motherland through the Bharat Mata figure is that: it overtly and directly closes off any feminist demand for

changing the status quo, the only possible orientation to this figure being that of worship and not of justice. On the other hand, by making the territory of the nation drawn on the contours of the maternal figure, it limits questioning, much like the patriotism instilled in Anandmath, a slogan like “Jai Hind” (Victory for India) couldn’t exhort them to dedicate themselves selflessly in the duty of the motherland as captured by “Bharat Mata ki Jai” (Victory for Mother India).

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