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## **The Predominant sense of Colonization in the Construction of “Bharat-Mata”: The Mother Image in Post-Colonial Indian Politics**

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### **Abstract:**

Though a number of works have been attempted focusing on the concept of ‘nation-mother’ associated with the identity of Indian nation, which was built in the narratives at the time of Indian Nationalist Movement, it would be interesting to analyze the concept in association to a son-mother relationship which lies behind the construction of the ‘nation-mother’. This work tries to show how in patriarchal set up, the mother figure is provided with the fixed role –as a puppet in the hands of a patriarchal son figure, be it before Independence or in the post-Independence period. In this work it is also shown how the son figures change their role according to the altered situations and how each time, they stand as the leading figures, be it as the ‘protector’ or ‘controller’ of the mother figure. In this construct, the mother is portrayed always as a submissive figure who is in need of a son to protect and lead herself. Thus, the mother figure is shown as dependent on her sons before the Independence and even after Independence of Indian nation. However, in present situation, the image of the mother is exploited by different political parties in favor of their political strategies. All political parties pretend to do what is best for the ‘nation-mother’. Based on the above observations, this paper tries to address the basic question whether even after so many years of Indian Independence the ‘nation-mother’ can claim herself as decolonized or not.

**Keywords:** Nation-mother; Colonialization; Independence; Patriarchy; Politics; Construct.

The culture of ‘nature-mother’ equation is quite old in the context of any cultural and literary history. One easily associates the image of nature as ‘nurturer’, ‘life-giver’ with that of a mother. This is how the concept of ‘nature-mother’ or ‘mother-earth’ emerged. And this gender-based identify of ‘nature’ or ‘earth’ is constructed by Patriarchy who dominates the cultural and

literary history all along. As a policy to dominate the women, Patriarchy creates the binaries—“male-female, mind-body, nature-culture, reason-emotion, public-private, labor-love” (Glenn, et al. 13). “These gender-based differences are fairly universal: all over the world, in every society, Patriarchy knows no boundary or nationality.” (Sethi28).

The association of the mother image with the homeland is another phenomenon in the context of cultural history. In Indian context, the nationalist agendas in 19<sup>th</sup> Century, through its narrative, constructed the figure of a 'nation-mother'. The purpose for this gender-based construction was to fire the nationalist ire against the oppressors and to inspire the 'santans' (sons) to protect their 'mother' from the assault in the hands of 'outsider'. Patriarchy takes it for granted that only for a mother figure, there is every possibility to be the victim of male oppression and violence. Patriarchy believes that a father figure, having super masculine power, can fight against the oppression which a mother cannot. So, the patriarchal product 'santans' (sons) appears on the platform to protect the dignity of their 'mother'. The nationalist narratives at pre-independence India created another binary—the 'self' and the 'other'. In Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's narrative (*Anandamath*), the 'other' referred to the Muslim. In 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalist discourse the Britishers were considered to be the 'other'. The invasion of the home-mother-self by the 'other' was what instigated the 'santans' (sons) to fight back against the invaders.

Even after the independence, the concept of 'nation-mother' still continues to be predominant in Indian political discourses. Though in post-independence India various strands of nationalism arise, the concept of 'mother-India' still continues to exist with a slight alteration of significance from that of the earlier. In today's India, all the political parties try to project themselves as the ideal 'santans' (sons) of their 'mother' and consider one another to be the 'other' or 'outsider'. And what is more important in this context is that even after the seventy-two years of Indian independence, the nation never ceases to be the 'mother'. It is clear here that as long as the nation will continue to fit herself in the figure of the 'mother', she will never cease to be dependent on her 'santans' (sons) for her own protection. From this perspective, Indian independence is basically the transfer of the possession of the 'mother' from one hand to another hand. Here, how can one confidently claim that 'nation-mother' was ever decolonized? How can one say that she ever ceased to be the puppet in the hands of Patriarchy? Yes, she had been the puppet in the hands of the 'outsider' before the independence. And after independence, she plays

the same role as a puppet in the hands of her own 'santans' (sons). Nothing much changed in her situation.

And this work tries to problematize the basic question—whether ever 'mother-India' was decolonized or not. For this purpose, in the first section, the work focuses on the historical context of the construction of the 'nation-mother'—how the nationalist ideology constructed and employed the image of the nation as a 'mother'. This section also focuses on how the nationalist narratives of that time helped to build an imaginary, artificial and unified figure of mother India, and what was the objective behind such construction. The next section centers around how the ritual to consider the nation as 'mother' does work even in the post-colonial, post-independence India where every political party, every community finds one another to be 'strangers'. And all of them try to project themselves to be concerned to protect their 'mother' from the 'stranger'. This section also tries to hint towards the politics lying behind the projection of different political parties as the well-wishers and protectors of the 'mother'.

In the Introduction to *Focus India*, T. Vijay Kumar states, "To seek to understand a nation through its fictional narratives is not to either fictionalize the nation or to nationalize the fiction... The attempt in fact is to mark the synergy between nation and imagination and to rethink the nation by thinking through the narration." (11). As Homi K Bhabha points out in *Nation and Narration*, "to study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself" (3). Every narrative seeks to observe the nation through its own point of view and constructs the figure of nation accordingly. The construction of the figure of 'Bharat-Mata' in the narrative of a nineteenth century Bengali text *Ananda math* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee is basically based on the ideal of a Hindu goddess. In his novel, Chatterjee uses the figure of three goddesses—'Jagaddhatri', 'Kali' and 'Durga' to demonstrate the three phases of Indian nation—past, present and future respectively. Even Abanindranath Tagore, in 1905, in his painting of 'Bharat-Mata' creates a mother figure nearly based on the ideal of a Hindu goddess, clad in saffron and having four hands holding the emblem of the culture of India. Visualized as a serene, saffron-clad ascetic woman, the mother carries the boon of food, clothing, learning and spiritual salvation in her four hands. In both of the constructs by Bankim Chandra and Abanindranath, the figure of a Bengali Hindu mother becomes apparent. Other castes and language communities of broader India find it difficult to associate the particular religion and culture based mother figure

with their own mother. As Sugata Bose has pointed out— “The equation of nation with goddess understandably left many Muslim cold.” (15). The narratives that depicted the nation as mother, emerging in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, became much more complex and even flowed into divergent streams. The predominant vision of the 'mother-nation' in that time was basically the image of 'mother-Bengal'. “A conscious creation of an 'artistic' icon of the nation, Abanindranath tells us in a memoir that he had conceived his image as ‘Banga Mata’ and later, almost as an act of generosity towards the larger cause of Indian nationalism, decided to title it ‘Bharat-Mata’” (Guha-Thakurta 255-258). So, in order to propagate the idea of wholeness, the 'mother' in Bankim Chandra's *Anandamath* and Abanindranath's “Bharat-Mata”, both originally conceived as 'mother-Bengal', ungrudgingly offered in the service of a wider Indian nation. And with these, an artificial abstraction was made in order to construct the image of “Bharat-Mata”.

In the cultural context of Bengal, the nationalist cult of the ‘mother’ emphasized the female principle as 'Sakti' or the source of strength-- as are Bankim Chandra's 'Jagaddhatri' and 'Durga' (729). But there is also another contradictory image of the ‘mother’ as an “archetypical, hapless, female victim” (Bose 7) that is present in the nationalistic iconography. As Bankim Chandra's 'Kali ma', instead of being a smiling, exalted figure, is someone “deeply sunk into darkness”, “bankrupt” and “half-naked” (729). Even Abanindranath's “Bharat-Mata” is also someone “pale, fearful, frail” (Bose 7).

Now the question arises why in the nationalist discourse, such projection of the nation as 'mother' was needed—and basically, why the particular 'mother' figure was invoked. One way to answer the question may be what Rumina Sethi comments— “The link between woman-as-mother and nation-mother serves the important function of staking claim to the land of one's birth which has been forcibly controlled by foreigners” (20). A significant example would be Bankim Chandra's *Anandamath*, in which the link between the land and the ‘mother’ becomes apparent when Mahendra is told— “We call our land our mother; but for her, we have neither mother, father, brother, nor friend. We have neither wife nor son nor house nor home. We have her alone, cool with delightful winds, rich with harvests...” (725). The link between the land and 'mother' is also expressed in Bipin Chandra Pal's statement when he said— “Our history is the sacred biography of the Mother. Our philosophies are the revelation of the Mother's mind. Our arts—our poetry and our painting, our music..., all these are the outflow of the Mother's diverse moods and experiences. Our religion is the organized expression of the soul of the Mother” (134).

It is tempting to interpret 'the concept of the Motherland-Desmata' as Tanika Sarkar has done, as a cultural artefact (2011). But to the nationalist thinkers like Bipin Chandra Pal, the motherland was in origin "not a mere idea or fancy, but a distinct personality. The woman who bore them, and nurses them, and brought them up with her own life and substance was no more real than the land which bore and reared, and gave food and shelter to all their race. (Bose 6).

The concept of Mother India as a unified whole nation was constructed, basically, to evoke the notion of brotherhood among the 'santans' (sons) of the Mother. Here, this reference to the 'santans' (sons) makes it implicit that both the Earth-mother and the nation-Mother "exist only for sons, not for daughters" (Sethi 21). This makes it clear that only a Hindu male figure does have the quality to claim himself as the santan (son) of 'Bharat-mata'. Thus, nationalist ideology, "implicitly, though not explicitly, portrayed a son-mother relationship" (Bose 8). Though a few women performed Swadeshi services of various kinds for the Mother, they entered the public life primarily to play maternal role. The traditional gender role entered even in nationalist discourse.

The necessity of the construction of such Mother figure can be seen from another perspective. It can be said that the visual image of the Mother was needed to grasp the abstract concept of the nation. The nineteenth century nationalist movement was privileged with this power of visual imagery. The image of 'Srinkhalita Bharatmata', (the Mother bound in chains), was widely used emotive image in nationalist posters. "Nationalists like Jawaharlal Nehru relied heavily on the metaphor of sexual aggression and rape in their critiques of the violence perpetrated by colonial masters." (Bose 5). The contrast between "ma kichilen" (the way Mother had been) and "ma kihoyechen" (what Mother has become) (Chatterjee 729) was quite enough to fire the nationalist ire. In addition to her glorious past and sorry present, the utopia of "ma kihoiben" (what Mother will be) (Chatterjee 729) constituted a powerful temporal sequence that boosted the nationalist morale. Even "Muslims were familiar with and understood the concept of the nation as Mother even if they did not fully share the Bengali Hindu's mother complex." (Bose 15). Bengali Muslim revolutionary poet Kazi Nazrul Islam made a powerful evocation of the nation as Mother in his popular nationalist songs when he exhorted the leader, imagined as the captain of ship in peril, to face up to the challenge of saving his nation... and to say unambiguously that those who were drowning were all Mother's children. (Islam 288-289).

Still, in the narratives of nineteenth and pre-independence twentieth century the concept of nation was, basically, as a unified and predominantly Hindu Nation. “Derozio wrote about India as a kind of pure nation, with the Muslim as the ‘other’ in the poem “The Golden Vase”” (Narayan 35). But the notion of the 'unified Hindu Nation' directly contradicts to the notion of India as 'unity in diversity'. As Tagore put it, “Where there is a genuine difference, it is by expressing and restraining that difference in its proper place that it is possible to fashion unity. Unity cannot be achieved by issuing legal fiats that everybody is one.” (382).

B. R. Ambedkar once stated— “Nationality is a social feeling. It is a feeling of corporate sentiment of oneness which makes those who are charged with it feel that they are kith and kin” (31). Nationality for Ambedkar also involves an emotional tie— “a longing not to belong to any other group” (31). But even after the making of the nation-state of independent India, the “feeling of corporate sentiment of oneness” is somehow disrupted. In post-independence India, there arise different strands of nationalism based on religion, community, region etc. And every one of them wishes to predominate over the other. The sectarian strands of Hindu nationalism and Muslim nationalism stand in opposition to the secular Indian nationalism. In today’s India, as in Bankim Chandra’s *Anandamath*, the Hindu nationalists are much concerned to protect their “Hinduani” (Hinduism) (Chatterjee 727). They are always eager to turn away the 'other' out of the country. The construction of a United Hindu Nation is the motto of today’s Hindu nationalism. This type of nation building is “mechanical organization of the nation form that posed a danger to humanity” (Bose x). The nation is now in a state where every community is fearing each other like the prowling beast of the night-time and shutting their doors of hospitality. Tagore once had foreseen the tyranny of social restrictions in India. He wrote that the social habit of mind impels us to make the life of our fellow beings a burden to them where they differ from us even in such a thing as their choice of food. (Bose xv). This is the case of today’s India. As Ambedkar stated about different strands of nationalism that “the effect of having a nation within a nation is ultimately destructive—it cannot but have the effect of rending the state in fragments.” (31). Bose states— “A post-colonial state, unitary in form, could only accommodate the one strand of singular nationalism” (24).

Different political parties in India today consider one another as the 'other'. They are at the extreme level of hostility. But interestingly, they all share one common thing—sticking to the concept of ‘mother-India’. All political parties try to project themselves as the ideal 'santans'

(sons) of the 'mother-nation'. As if they are in a competition of such projection. But of course, there is some underlying politics behind such projection. Let us see what it can be.

It is true that possession leads to power. Possession is often defined as the complete control over a thing. Patriarchy often objectifies women and considers them to be something which can be possessed and controlled over. Likewise, behind the projection of a party for the welfare of the nation, different political parties, in reality, struggle for the power to possess and control over the nation-mother. "They play a double rhetorical game: speaking moderately to appeal to the center and win votes, but sending a message of intense ideological commitment to its base." (Nussbaum 183). Thus, nation-mother again becomes the puppet in the hands of different political parties. Whatever it is—to 'protect' or to 'control' the Mother, it is always the patriarchal son figure who plays the role. In fact, in present India, "the concept of motherland has been 'husbanded' with the Hindu god Ram to construct 'Ramjanmabhoomi' (the birthplace of Ram) out of the earlier national concept of motherland or 'matribhoomi'." (Sethi 25).

Thus, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and the pre-independence 20<sup>th</sup> century, the image of the 'nation-mother' was constructed to inspire the nationalist freedom fighters to fight against the foreign oppressors. The concept, once constructed by the narratives of nationalist agendas, continues to exist even in post-independence today's India. And every political party exploits this image of the 'mother' for their own profit. In their struggle for power possession the 'mother' has become the object of possession. She never has been free from the grasp of the patriarchal male figure. The son figure always posits himself as both the protector and the controller of the 'mother'. In the pre-independence Indian context, the 'santans' (sons) projected themselves as the protector of 'Bharat-Mata'. And in post-independence Indian context, the 'santans' (sons) are the controller of the 'mother'. In this context whether ever 'Bharat-mata' was decolonized or not remains a big question.

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