

Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal

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The burgeoning nationalism in colonial Bengal of the last quarter of the nineteenth century caught hold of the image of the mother to represent the nationalist aspiration. The ideology of motherhood was given an enormous importance in the cultural life of Bengal. Was the choice of the mother merely an accidental one? Or was there something about the culture of the Bengalis that created the requisite precondition for such a choice?

The great historical endeavour of man has been to reconquer the reproductive function over woman and to fight off the incipient power derived from the latter's procreative capacities.

Violence, war, education, law and ideology have served this purpose...

—Claude Meillasoux, 'The Pregnant Male'

I

WOMEN'S exclusive confinement to reproductive function and the attendant emphasis on nurturance have rendered the domain of motherhood specially vulnerable to patriarchal control. The idea of an original matriarchate conceived by Bachofen and Morgan that was taken up by Engels is no longer acceptable as a historical reality. [Bachofen, 1861; Morgan, 1871; Engels, 1884]. However, as Meillasoux has pointed out this myth of an original matriarchate is an acknowledgement of the power of the reproductive arena and its later appropriation by the patriarchy [1986: 15]. This appropriation has taken many different forms in different societies which display little similarities with the European model with which Bachofen had originally conceived his study of mother-right [1861]. Possibly it was an acute sense of the controlling device of the patriarchal norms with which the European society was being re-organised that prompted Bachofen to explore the idea of an original matriarchate. Engels certainly considered the origin of private property leading to the overthrow of the mother-right as the great 'world historic defeat of the female sex' [Engels: 231]. It fostered his utopian dream of freeing women by breaking down the capitalist mode of production. If private property had helped to enslave women the abolition of it would help to emancipate women from the sphere of reproduction into the sphere of social production. However, as Simone de Beauvoir pointed out, it is by denying the reproductive power of women that this conception of emancipation is made to stand [1949: 89].

One of the most spectacular ploys of capitalist patriarchy has been the simultaneous privatisation and institutionalisation of motherhood. Loving nurturing mothers and healthy babies are the most prized show pieces in the world of advertisements, the strong arm of capitalism. Science has brought some possibility of women being in control over her own reproductive powers but this control is constantly vitiated by patriarchal norms within which women pro-

duce children. Patriarchy, whether in its more traditional or modern form constantly tries to glorify motherhood as the most prized vocation for women. A survey of the ideological content of popular literature would have yielded interesting results, but will not be attempted here as it falls outside the purview of this study. What this paper proposes to do is to focus on a specific phase of Indian history when in order to lend force to nationalism, the ideology of motherhood was given an enormous importance in the cultural life of Bengal. As a phenomenon it was quite unique—religious, cultural and the aesthetic domain were politicised with the help of the notion of motherhood. This was specially facilitated by the ideological aspect of motherhood—it has served the purpose of taking away real power from women and creating a myth about her strength and power. The glorification of motherhood in colonial Bengal was merely in the domain of ideology. Such an ideology was based on a philosophy of deprivation for women in the world of practice.

The burgeoning nationalism in colonial Bengal of the last quarter of the nineteenth century caught hold of the image of mother to represent the nationalist aspiration. Was the choice of the mother merely an accidental one? Or was there something about the culture of the Bengalis that created the requisite precondition for such a choice?

One obvious way of presenting the glorification of motherhood in the colonial period is to interpret it as a retrograde step, a betrayal of the liberal package of the social reform era of the first six decades of the nineteenth century in colonial Bengal when there were attempts to improve the lot of women. According to such a reading, the choice of the problematic in this paper may, therefore, be read as an exercise in reactionary social thought. Such a reading, however, turns a blind eye to the fact that motherhood was all along a culturally privileged concept in Bengal. The early nationalists did not have to invent it in order to overthrow the social reformers. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the avant-garde poet of Bengal renaissance once described his close friend the great social reformer Iswar-chandra Vidyasagar as a man 'with the courage of a lion, the energy of an Englishman and the heart of a Bengali mother'. This paradigmatic description of a perfect gentleman redolent of renaissance contains the seeds of a very real typology. The colonial intelligentsia had to accommodate the public image of the foreign rulers

into an unmistakable indigenous sign that would mark a colonial Bengali man as distinct from the alien rulers. 'Bengali mother' was such a sign, and its force increased as the experience of colonialism began to make itself felt and Bengali society entered its nationalist phase. Coming from the great 'moderniser' Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a living embodiment of the liberal-radical phase of colonial Bengal usually referred to as 'Bengal renaissance', this description indicates the continuity in the line of thinking from the 'liberal' social reform era to the 'conservative' nationalists, who were supposed to have set the clock back for women in colonial India [Murshid, 1983, pp 175-198]. The principle of selectivity in the use of ideology not merely from the west but from the east is evident in this particular cluster [Chatterji, 1989, pp 236-37]. Bengali mothers proverbially stood for unstinting affection, manifested in an undying spirit of self-sacrifice for the family. The social reform era, when there were vigorous protests against overt oppression of women such as child marriage, perpetual widowhood for the caste Hindu women, widow burning on the husband's funeral pyre, considered motherhood in a very positive light. Vidyasagar was supposed to have swam across a turbulent river in order not to fail his appointment with his mother. With the exception of Raja Rammohan Roy the hagiography of all social reformers contain eulogies of their mothers. Mothers were justified by the greatness of their sons. Ramakrishna Paramahansa suggested this with his graphic expressive Bengali when he complimented the mother of the great religious reformer Keshab Chunder Sen by pointing out that 'people will celebrate her entrails' implying that her son has glorified her womb. This is the kind of compensatory history of Bengali womanhood that is sought to be explored in this paper. This paper will lean a little heavily on the mythicising of the concept of motherhood that nationalism borrowed from the prevalence of mother cult in Bengal both in the great and the little tradition. With the emphasis on one's selfhood and identity to be opposed to the western rulers, motherhood emerged as the domain which the colonised could claim as their own. The empowering of the symbol of motherhood should not be seen as a mere victory of traditionalism over the modernising tendency of the social reform era. In their search for something that was distinctly their own, what better symbol of their nationalist

aspiration than motherhood for the Bengali male? In this symbolising act we get a microcosmic view of the configuration within which the nationalist ideology worked in colonial Bengal. It was obviously an overt symbol of patriarchal control over the notion of womanhood. The nationalist glorification of motherhood had a far-reaching impact on the ideological control over women. Motherhood was seen as the 'ultimate identity' of Bengali women.¹ It was an excellent ploy to keep women out of privileges like education and profession that were being wrested by their men and glorifying womanhood only through her reproductive powers. The difference is that while the social reform era addressed live women and tried to bring the colonial state machinery to bear upon their lives, the nationalist era used motherhood as the only viable symbol of Bengali womanhood. It was a symbol, moreover, that helped to bridge the social, religious and political domain of colonial society. Motherhood representing nationalism was a multi-dimensional symbol: its authenticity arose out of its natural appropriateness to the social climate of Bengal.

With the emergence of the Bengalis as a distinctive identity in the Gangetic delta, a confirmation of the spirit of tender motherhood was found in the natural setting which Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay had described so movingly as well watered and fertile (*sujalang suphalang, shasyashyamalang*). The natural bounty of the soil encouraged the representation of Bengal as an affectionate mother, ever ready to respond to the demands of her children. This is picked up in the social life of Bengal. The texture of social communication in Bengal is permeated by the address of mother. This is perhaps the only part of India where the address is used not only by the offsprings and their spouses and by servants to the mistress, but towards unknown women in the street and young girls.

The ideology of motherhood in Bengal is a complex phenomenon that needs a full length study. It will involve studies of anthropology, history, politics, literature, mythology and semiotics. What I propose to do here is provisionally to cut a slice of this complex web and put the literary, religious and political material under a historical scrutiny. Choosing the 'moment' of the burgeoning of nationalism in colonial Bengal I wish to capture something of the special investiture that the notion of motherhood went through in order to represent the commitment and the agony generated by the colonial experience. The masculine occident conceived the orient as a feminine image. Ironically the nationalists conceived their own country as the great mother figure in keeping with the sanction derived from the religious practices of Hindu Bengal. This helped to Hinduise the tone of nationalism in Bengal. By representing the country as a Hindu mother/goddess the nationalist culture helped to inject a significant order into the struggle to rejoin what is intimately and unmistakably one's own. It is this political image that resulted in a composite, often self-contradictory image of

the mother. The human ideal was one of all-suffering mother. To use Swami Vivekananda's words, 'that marvellous, unselfish, all-suffering, ever forgiving mother' [Vol 8: 58]. As the stable centre of a fragile colonial society, she provides constant solace to the humiliated son; on occasion her heroism acts as an inspiration to lift up the downtrodden spirit of the son. But she is also a divine ideal. In her divine form she is the destructive Shakti, ready to destroy the demon of evil. Literature of the colonial era, despite its assimilation of western genres continued to pay fulsome tribute to mothers who upheld the pristine essence of what is durable. From Anurupa Devi's *Mother* to Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of One Thousand and Eighty Four* motherhood is made to stand for the sacrosanct space not sullied by any petty influence. Even in the sphere of education mothers were valued as the wholesome agents of education who will not allow a drastic reversal of indigenous values. In the image of the mother, order and progress mingle to form one of the most compelling myths of colonial Bengal. The refraction of this may be found in popular fiction and cinema even today.

II

The investiture of motherhood, as I have called it, has had roots in popular religious practice of Bengal. Mother goddesses of Bengal have attracted considerable attention from anthropologists who have traced local mother cults in village level practices. Some of these have been related to realities such as fever epidemics [Nicholas 1982: 198-207] or to social nobility of rural classes like Mahishyas in rural Bengal [194-198]. Commenting on the importance given to mothers in Bengali culture, Ralph Nicholas observes,

Mother herself is a person to be worshipped in Hindu Bengal. In this however she is no different from the father [1982: 192].

However, the relationship is 'complementary with subordination'. Yet the subordination, is not to be taken at its face value: goddesses sitting at the left of gods are not to be taken as mere consorts:

to accept a view of the feminine half of the Hindu pantheon as simply a collection of 'consorts' of the gods would be to miss something fundamental about Indian religion as well as to pass silently over a critical part of what Hindu cultures say about women [192].

While it is difficult to accept the significance attached to goddesses as evidence of what Hindu cultures say about women, it is undeniable that the prevalence of goddess worship in Bengal certainly facilitated the empowering of the mother image in Bengal so that it becomes the most dominant myth of colonial Bengal. It is difficult to think of any other myth that might have been a more compelling emblem of the humiliation and deprivation due to colonial exploitation. The mother image is drawn as much from the mainstream religious worship of the Hindus as from their local religious practices and folktales. The neglected good

wife of the kind who has been won over by the machinations of the glamorous second wife is a quintessential mother figure.² In a famous nationalist song of Tagore, the deserted woman is made into a poor mother image and made to stand for Bengal under foreign domination:

When I had neglected to look you in the face
I had thought you were the poor mother
Left deserted in a broken house, suffering
endlessly...

The moment of nationalist uprising is seen as that of the transformation of the mother: she comes out resplendent in a goddess form from the 'heart of Bengal'.

Where are your rags, where is your pale smile?

The splendour of your feet has overspread the sky.

Tagore continues to explore the paradox dear to the heart of Hindu Bengalis: in her transformed shape Bengal combines the image of the Shakti, the all-powerful goddess who puts fear into the lives of miscreants and the reassuring smile of an affectionate mother:

Sword in your right hand you remove fear with your left

Two eyes smile with affection, the third emits fire...

The mother image that was projected by the anti-colonialist uprising was a combination of the affective warmth of a quintessentially Bengali mother and the mother goddess Shakti, known under various names as Durga, Chandi or Kali, who occupies a very important position in mainstream religious practice.

Shashibhushan Das Gupta notes the special place that mother worship occupies in the Indian society. Without any consideration of mother right as we find in the writings of Bachofen, Das Gupta comments on the prevalence of mother worship to be found in most early societies:

Belief in some form or other in the mother goddess in the good old days (sic) of many of the races, Semitic, Hellenic, Teutonic and Nordic alike. But what singles India out in this respect is the continued history of the cult from the hoary past down to the modern times and the way in which religious consciousness, developing and deepening round this Mother concept influenced the ideas of the whole nation through ages [1953: 49].

For the creators of Vedic literature, the Aryans who as Sukumari Bhattacharji has shown so eloquently, were worshippers of sun, it was no mean matter that Aditi the mother goddess is seen as the mother of sun [Bhattacharji, 1970: 160]. The other Vedic mother goddess mentioned by Das Gupta as being of more immediate significance for Bengal is Prithvi the mother goddess, who in the later Upanishads gets identified with Shri or Lakshmi, goddess of harvest and prosperity [52]. Prithvi, as Das Gupta reminds us, is constantly associated with the male duty *Dyans* (sky) [52]. However, in this form, she is the 'field' to be inseminated by the seed [Leela Dube].

The Bengali cultivators even to this day observe the ritual of Ambabachi when the

mother earth is supposed to menstruate. No ploughing is allowed on those days in many agricultural communities in Bengal, no cooking is allowed, so as not to pollute the earth. This was seen as a propitiation ceremony as it occurs at the end of summer and the beginning of the rains. It is a symptom of the patriarchal hold over such mother cult practice that while the original performers of this penance included Brahmins as well as widows [Bandyopadhyay: 172]; today the penance among the caste Hindus has fallen entirely on the widows, who in any case, are the worst victims of gender discrimination in nutrition.

The most popular religious festivals among the Hindus in Bengal is Durga worship in autumn, which lasts about four days. Das Gupta suggests, quite plausibly, that it is an amalgam of goddess Durga with the earth goddess. It is worth quoting the detailed evidence that he gives for this:

Autumn worship of mother goddess in her various aspects begins in autumn, which marks the beginning of the harvest season in Bengal... In the autumnal worship of Durga, her first representative is a branch of the *bilva* tree... In the second stage the representative is the Navapatrika—female figure made with plantain trees and eight other plants and herbs. Also mother is often identified in her worship with rice (*dhanyarupa*); an epithet of Durga is Shakamvari, i.e. herb nourishing goddess... In the autumnal worship of the goddess as Lakshmi, the Navapatrika is taken to in some parts of Bengal, as the best representative of the goddess. [54].

This association with agricultural prosperity contributed to the worship of Devi or Shakti as the female principle, even though it had very little sanction in the male dominated Vedic pantheon. The feminine principle was worshipped among the different sections of the society, both elite and non-elite. The nationalist appropriation of the Shakti image possibly owed a great deal to its incorporation within the hegemonic culture of the religious and temporal rulers of society.

Worship of the Devi as the female principle has an old tradition in Bengali culture. There are records of Devi worship going back to the sixteenth century. Most of the great twelve chieftains of Bengal known as Baro Bhuiyans were worshippers of Shakti. In the seventeenth century there are celebratory poems extolling the devi, derived mostly from 'Seven hundred Durgas' (*Durgasaptashati*) or Chandi derived from the *Markandeya Purana*. Among the famous *mangalkavyas* written in the eighteenth century, Chandimangalkavya is one of the most famous. However, the worship of mother goddesses showed a resilience in Bengali culture that was quite remarkable. In the great tradition Shakti worship helped to bring together different schools of philosophy and worship, such as Samkhya, Vedanta, Vaishnavism and Tantrism [Das Gupta: 68]. However, the local village level deities were mostly female and looked after the everyday problems of disease, epidemics, childbirth and so on. [Ray: 852-3; Ray Chaudhuri: 137-39; Nicholas: 200]. It was

certainly fed, as Kosambi suggests, by pre-Aryan, often tribal cults of mother goddess, sometimes going back to matriarchal forms of society. [Kosambi 1962: 86-91; Ray, 588-92]

Mother worship in India necessarily developed through a synthesis of the pre-Aryan and the Aryan. Vedic worship is dominated by the male deities. Only the Devi-sukta in the Rigveda is a reminder of the prevalence of mother worship. In the one hundred and twenty-fifth hymn in the tenth mandala, *vacha* (speech) ecstatically expresses her complete union with the great one (Brahman, Logos).

I am the sovereign power (over all the worlds), bestower of all wealth, cognisant (of the supreme being, first among those to whom sacrificial homage is to be offered; the gods in all places worship but me, who am diverse in form and permeate everything... I transcend the heaven above. I transcend the earth below—this is the greatness I have attained [Das Gupta: 60-61].

It is the union with the male logos, however that brings about the state of blissful perfection in the Devi. Curiously enough, the *Rg veda* talks about another goddess which is probably the form that facilitates her assimilation into the practices of more popular culture. This is *ratri* (Night) who is invoked as a Devi, as the daughter of the heaven above, who pervades the worlds, who protects all beings from evils and gives them peaceful shelter in her lap just like an affectionate mother [Das Gupta, 1985: 61].

This dark Devi, associated in the later puranas with the female principle of Maya, links up Vedic worship with many of the later tantrik forms used by the worshippers of Shakti. According to Das Gupta, epithets suffixed by *ratri* are applied to Durga in the Chandi chapters of the *Markandeya Purana*.

Despite references to other mother goddesses in the Vedas, popular worship of mother goddesses such as Durga, Chandi or Kali did not take off either in the Vedic age or the age of the epics. However, it is made amply clear that the cults of mother goddesses, though marginal in these phases, remained associated with harvest and fertility.

Any survey of the evolution of the Shakti worship in India shows that the mother goddess, Maya or not, stands for the creative principle. Destruction stands in a binary relation with creation, and the mother goddess is the fierce goddess Chandi, destroying evil and hence a fortress in the shape of Durga. It is the *Markandeya Purana* that provides the glorification of the goddess (*Devi mahatmya*) in the form of Durga or Chandi. This is the form in which she is supposed to protect her devotees from all troubles (*durgatinashini*).

As the creative principle the Shakti is also *mahamaya*—the great principle of illusion which makes the world go on. However, this Shakti is also manifested in the form of Mahakali, since she embodies the eternal time (*kala*) in her. It is as *kala* that she not only destroys but creates. From her flow the vibrating dance of creation. It is this all destructive Shakti that controls the creative powers in the cult of Kali worship that

prevailed in Bengal in the eighteenth century.

In a comparative study of folktales from seven different regions of India Sudhir Kakar has demonstrated that Bengali culture is exceptionally prone to a destructive and threatening aspect of mother [Kakar, 1974]. The presence of the mother goddesses at the lower reaches of society is usually associated with such poverty and deprivation that many of the mother goddesses were forces of the dark to be propitiated. Of all the forms of Shakti worshipped in Bengal the darkest and the most terrifying was Kali, the female energy that stands on male corpse. This is possibly the most unique form of a consort who dances on the corpse of a husband.

Outsiders to Bengali culture possibly notice the terrifying form of Kali but miss out the tenderness that gets addressed to even such a terrifying symbol. The Shakti cult among Bengalis, paradoxically enough, is upheld by the affective qualities of a son's yearning for the mother. A blend of the Vaishnava sentiment of Bhakti with the worship of Shakti marks the mother worship in Bengal. This 'woman' at any rate has no fear of being 'womanly'.³

According to Nihar Ranjan Ray the form of Kali changed in the Hindu culture in Bengal in the eighteenth century in the face of the alien presence of the Muslim rulers [Ray, 1949: 666]. The combination of tenderness and yearning with the fearsome image of Kali is the hallmark of the great devotee of Kali in the eighteenth century, viz, Ramprasad Sen. He remains a great culture hero in urban and rural Bengal even today as his composition of devotional songs addressed to Kali form a major genre in the repertoire of Bengali lyrics called Shyama-sangeet sung even today. Ramprasad's address to Kali does not relate to the polity but to an intense note of spiritual cultivation. The songs express highly charged with emotion, the yearnings of a son wanting to unite with the mother. A mere book-keeper, he was asked by his employer for the accounts, it was found that Ramprasad had written

Mother, make me thine accountant
I shall never prove defaulter.

[Nivedita 1897: 46]

Simple imagery taken from everyday life of the toiler keeps the songs of Ramprasad perennially alive,

Mother, how much longer will you make me go round in circle,
Like the ox in the oilpress, blindfolded?

This image of the Shakti has no hesitation in appearing in womanly motherly overtones. The goddess Kali is addressed in these songs in familiar and familial terms, without any of the hegemonic overtones that characterises the revival of the icon of Kali by the nationalists.

Dive deep of my mind, taking the name of Kali. Sometimes esoteric doctrines of mother worship are communicated in accessible images.

In the market place of this world,
The mother sits flying Her kite
In a hundred thousand,
She cuts the string of one or two

And when the kite soars up into the Infinite
On how she laughs and claps her hands.

(Nivedita 1897: 55)

The freedom that is envisaged here is spiritual freedom.

In analysing the transmission of icons in political struggle one has to take into account internal channels such as religious history. Ramprasad's intimate and heart rending songs to Kali were given a new currency in the nineteenth century by the other worshipper of Kali, Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Through the mediating channel of Ramakrishna, the songs of Ramprasad jumped the barrier of colonial education and entered the arena of the post-colonial mainstream culture of Bengal in nineteenth century.

Motherhood becomes the site of struggle in colonial India as the unadulterated concept of motherhood is built into one of the main contrasts between the east and the west in the writings of two main disciples of Ramakrishna: Swami Vivekananda and his disciple Sister Nivedita. One of the most articulate among the foreigners, Margaret Noble, an Irish woman, became Sister Nivedita in order to make Calcutta her home. Sister Nivedita was no ordinary convert to the proselytising Hinduism of Ramakrishna's organisation, but she made the leap into the anti-colonial struggle in Bengal and later on became a pan-Indian nationalist. In her book, *Kali the Mother*, Sister Nivedita makes a distinction between the Semitic (Judaism, Christianity) worship of the father and the Aryan (*sic*) devotion to the mother, Sister Nivedita says,

In the Aryan home, woman stands supreme. As wife in the west—lady and queen of her husband—as mother in the east,—a goddess throned in her son's worship—she is the bringer of sanctity and peace. [Nivedita, 1987: 16].

In the cult of mother worship in the west centring around Virgin Mary has emphasised the association "of all that is tender and precious with this thought of woman worship". Sister Nivedita feels this to be an incomplete package. It is in India, she feels, that "the thought of the mother has been realised in its completeness". The completeness arises from the assimilation of the destructive Shakti into the motherly tenderness that generates confidence. The following is the description given by Sister Nivedita:

In the east, the accepted symbol is of a woman nude, with flowing hair, so dark a blue that she seems in colour to be black; four handed—two hands in the act of blessing and two holding a knife and bleeding head respectively garlanded with skulls and dancing, with protruding tongue, on the prostrate figure of a man all white with ashes. [20]

Sister Nivedita, an iconographer of no mean stature, goes on to assert the special relationship with Kali:

...to her we belong. Whether we know it or not, we are Her children, playing round Her

knees. Life is but a game of hide-and-peek with Her, and, if in its course, we chance to touch Her feet, who can measure the shock of divine energy that enters into us? Who can utter the rapture of our cry 'mother'? [21]

In the changed context of an Orient that has been colonised by the Occident Sister Nivedita tries to restore the balance by reviving the tradition of Ramprasad Sen. In her splendid translation the hide-and-peek image comes alive in a song by Ramprasad:

Whom else should I cry to, mother?

The baby cries for its mother alone—

And I am not the son of such

That I should call any woman my mother [53].

The edge that comes out in the revived context is the pride of Swadeshi—the colonial subject is acutely conscious of his own mother. This mother is superior to all religious acts of penance such as visiting the Holy places of Benares:

Why should I go to Benares?

My mother's lotus-feet

Are millions and millions

Of holy places.

Sister Nivedita was paying her respects to the original guru of her Order Ramakrishna Paramahansa who had found a live context for the Kali songs of Ramprasad. Ramakrishna had once admonished someone "don't say amar, amar, amar, (mine, mine, mine) but say ma, ma, ma' (mother's, mother's mother's)" [Das Gupta: 83]. Nivedita, therefore worships Ramakrishna,

'the great incarnation of the spirit
of the mother towards her children

[Nivedita: 56-57]

Nivedita's Nationalism was not negated but sustained by this ascetic devotee of the mother, for she sees in the founding of his Order a rejuvenated India, with its new Universalist message of humanity

...it is not true that he expresses the mind of India alone, or even chiefly. For in him meet the feeling and thought of all mankind, and he, Ramakrishna, the devotee of *Kali*, represents Humanity [80].

Nivedita draws a contrast between the semitic worship of god the father with the Indian worship of the mother goddess thereby implying the greater spiritual purity of India. In Nivedita's highlighting of the ritual of mother worship as a Bengali/Hindu tradition was an attempt to turn Orientalism upside down. Mother worship helped to define for Nivedita a more humane land of the east, away from the masculine iron chains of the west. Nivedita's essentialist vision, one must remember, is not feminism, but the utopia of the humane nationalism she envisaged for Bengal/India.

The technique, perfected by Nivedita, was really her master's. Before a western audience Swami Vivekananda used motherhood to assert the distinctiveness of Indian culture.

Now the ideal woman in India is the mother, the mother first and mother last. The world woman calls up to the mind of the Hindu, motherland; and god is called mother.

In the west, the woman is wife. The idea of womanhood is concentrated there as the wife. To the ordinary man in India the whole force of womanhood is concentrated on motherhood. [Vivekananda, Vol 8: 57].

Woman's reproductive domain is thus abstracted, even fetishised, as Tanika Sarkar suggests [Sarkar, 1987: 2011]. Since the spiritual domain was the weapon in the hands of the nationalist, the glorification of motherhood was the double refined spirituality that was used as a major mode of representation by the Bengali nationalists [Chatterjee 1989: 249]. If worship of the mother goddess was the exclusive domain of Bengal/India, the land itself became the mother. The symbolic representation of India as the mother as well as the mother goddess became a major source of 'mass contact'. [Sarkar, 1973]. It helped to spread the message of swadeshi, both economic and cultural which erupted in Bengal at the turn of the century.

It was Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay who had first made an emblem of the country as mother in the song *Vande Mataram*. The song which was originally written to fill out a gap in his journal *Bangadarshan*, the song found its political context in his proto-nationalist novel *Anandamath*. The novel with its apparently collaborationist tag became the parable of the militant nationalism. The emphasis on the crisis ridden social order provides the fitting context for the rhetoric invoked by Bankim in a mixture of Sanskrit and Bengali. The 'invention of tradition' is so successful that it became the slogan of all militant nationalism. The song *Vande Mataram* is, however, merely an item in a far more consistent effort of Bankimchandra to politicise the mother goddess image. We begin to notice a new domain emerging. In their intense search for what may be considered their own, Bengali writers often turned to that intensely Bengali festival of the autumnal worship of Durga. Bankim attempts a concentrated building up of the religious sphere of Shakti worship into a political domain. This phenomenon deserves a study on its own. I shall touch upon only the salient points that are germane to the argument here.

Throughout his career Bankim meditated upon the political significance of the goddess Durga in her different manifestations as Shakti. In his creation of the early but brilliant confessions of his opium-sodden 'double' Kamalakanta, Bankim writes a very telling piece on the worship of the mother goddess Durga. In one of his psychedelic vision Kamalakanta sees, floating on turbulent waves,

the gold-adorned autumnal mother image of the first day's festivity (Saptami) smiling, floating on water, radiating lights. Is this mother? Yes, this is mother. I recognise my mother, my land of birth in this image of clay, embodying mother earth, adorned in many jewels but now buried in the wombs of time [Rachanavali II: 80].

Kamalakanta's prayer is full of the agony of the subject race:

Arise, O my mother, golden Bengal! Arise—now we will be good sons, will not let you

down. Arise, blessed mother—we will henceforth renounce narrow self-interest, will do good to others, will give up indolent sacrilegious sensuality. Arise, mother, tears are blinding me, arise, o mother Bengal[80].

Bankim has tried to historicise this metaphor of the mother goddess as the motherland. In a very early piece published in 1873 in his own journal *Bangadarshan* Bankim interprets the ten forms of the mother goddess as *Dasamahavidya* and sees the evolution of the Indian society in the ten successive forms, right from the past when the non-Aryans were subdued by the Aryans (Kali) through the wretched conditions of India under the Muslim rule (Dhumavati), right up to the futurist vision of Mahalakshmi when the Indian society will be prosperous and bountiful. This, one may say, is a very early prefiguration of the famous series of Mother images mentioned in *Anandamath*, the fiction that gave a shape and form to militant nationalism. This is the novel in which the full span of the 'condition of India' question is to be found in the three successive images of the mother goddess, corresponding to past, present and the future of Indian history. In his presentation of the present misery Bankim Chandra collapses Muslim as well as British rule and thus creates one of the most powerful icons of nationalist struggle. The description of the three images, "mother that was, mother that is, mother that will be", deserves to be quoted in full. This occurs in the eleventh chapter of the first part of the novel

Then the hermit took Mahendra to another room. Mahendra saw there the image of the great mother, upholder of the world, and adorned with all ornaments. She was an astounding embodiment of perfection. Mahendra asked the hermit: "Who is she?"

Hermit: "Mother as she was".

H: "What do you mean?"

M: Wild animals—lions and elephants—have covered at her feet. She has made a lotus garden of their verdurous gloom. Resplendent with smiles, bedecked with all ornaments, the mother shone forth with the brilliance of the rising sun. And there was no wealth that was not hers. Kneel before her.

When Mahendra had knelt reverently before the image of the divine nurturer that was his motherland, the hermit showed him a dark tunnel. "Come this way", he ordered.

The hermit himself went in and Mahendra followed with a throbbing heart.

Deep down there was a dark chamber illuminated faintly with some unknown source of light. In the translucent darkness Mahendra could see the image of another goddess Kali.

The hermit said, "Do you see? Mother. As she is". "Kali?" Mahendra's voice trembled with fear. "Kali. The deity of darkness and vile insights. Dispossessed of all she had; therefore naked. Our land is nothing but a graveyard now. And so she has that garland of skulls around her neck. She tramples on her consort, her own Shiva...who is bliss and benediction. Oh mother!"

The hermit's eyes were full of tears. Mahendra asked, "Why does she hold the skull and scimitar?"

"These are all the weapons we have given her, and we call ourselves her children! Come say with me—*Vande Mataram*."

Mahendra repeated "I worship thee mother"; and knelt before the goddess. Then the hermit said—"Come this way" and this time he began to climb up another tunnel. Suddenly the rays of the morning sun dazzled their eyes. Honey-voiced birds began to sing all around. Mahendra saw a huge marmoreal temple, and a golden deity with ten arms smiled forth in the gold of the rising sun. The hermit knelt in front of her:

"This is the mother as she will be", he said. "Ten arms stretch out in ten directions, each holding up a weapon that declares her power; the enemy of man lies vanquished at her feet and the ferocious lion is subjugated and turned against all those who dare to oppose her. Mother let your arms direct us." The hermit (Satyananda) began to weep in adoration. "Mother, let your arms show us the way. O mother with many weapons, rider of lion-most valiant of all animals—show us the way!"

Mahendra spoke with effusion: "When shall we see this image of the mother?"

The hermit replied, "That day, when all her children shall call her mother. That day the mother will be pleased". [*Rachanavali* I: 728-29].

III

In an early Sanskrit text of fifth/sixth century AD we get a reference to the presiding deity of Bharat well famed as the *Bharatmata* (Mother India). To her north is the Himalaya and Kanyakumari in the south is forever present. Prayer to this great Shakti frees men from re-birth. (*Samavidhana Brahman*).

This ancient redeeming image of the Bharat Mata as the presiding deity Shakti is taken up in a big way in the nationalist phase of Bengal. There were of course loyalist songs sung to mother Victoria in the pleading style of Ramprasad [Sarkar, 1987: 2011], but these were not marked by the interlocking crises of power and resistance that marks the nationalist use of the icon for which Bankim sets the tone. His message of *Vande Mataram* became a political battlecry (a travesty of it is still maintained by Congress(I) today. The extremist nationalist movement took it up with great gusto. Tripathi sees in this

an escapist mood which sought respite from the inexorable gruelling debate with the western culture, technology and material power in the protective womb of the past [Tripathi, 1967: 2].

The image is particularly apt in this context. Interestingly, this image is applied to the nationalist obsession with motherhood in a feminist analysis referred to earlier:

A new acute consciousness of the inexorable march of history with which India had never kept in step, of technological time with a westernised notion of progress as its goal, produced intolerable anxieties and a violent desire to break out of its frame by a return to a post, to one's mother, a reversion to the womb, to a state of innocence, of pleasure

where the infant is as yet un-differentiated from the mother, as yet unaware of his own distinct self [Sarkar 1987: 2011].

The sense of inadequacy that the heroism of the mother was supposed to cover, of course, belonged to the colonial male. By coalescing the mother goddess terrible and destructive with the affection for one's own mother, nationalists helped to domesticate Shakti within another nationalist image of the ideal joint Hindu family. The juxtaposition of the political and the familial marked the autumn worship of Durga that is carried on to this day with great fanfare. When Sister Nivedita writes about the civic pageantry of Durga Puja, she does not miss out its political significance.

For the mother of the universe shines forth in the life of humanity, as a woman, as family life, as country [Nivedita 1919: 324].

Bankim presentation of Durga with its agony of a colonial subject who has not yet found his proper national idiom, is invoked by Sister Nivedita as an unhesitating call for freedom:

It is more than thirty years since Bankim Chandra Chatterji, the great Bengali romancier, sang the vision of the ened Durga Puja as the hour of the motherland's need, as he saw the image plunge beneath the waves. That the poet spoke the innermost thought of his countrymen...is proved by the history that has gathered round his song...

Mother and motherland—where ends the one and where begins the other. Before which does a man stand with folded hands, when he bows his head still lower, and says with a new awe: My salutation to thee mother! [326].

The extremists like Aurobindo and Bepin Chandra Pal read deep political messages in Bankim's crisis-ridden images of Durga and Kali. Interestingly, it is in these two forms that the puranic goddess Chandi was believed to have emerged in the colonial period [Nandy 1980: 8-9].

What the nationalists did was to try and infuse a new hegemonic significance in the worship of these two mother goddesses. Ramakrishna's Kali worship contributed to this mainstream.

Vivekananda's poem *Kali the Mother* sets the tone of desperate heroism that was later politicised by the 'extremist nationalists, setting the ideological tone of so-called terrorism in nationalist politics:

Dancing made with joy,
Come, mother come,
For Terror is thy name,
Death is in thy breasts
Thou 'Time' the All-Destroyer!
Come, O Mother, come!
Who dares misery love
and hug the form of Death
Dance in Destructions dance
To him the mother comes.

Thus the image of the destructive mother goddess builds up a particular involvement with motherland, who has been exploited and ravished by foreign rulers.

The strength of the icon worked on two of the unlikely converts to the movement. Bepin Chandra Pal, a Brahmo and originally loyal to the providential present of the

British in India, and Aurobindo Ghosh whose original notion of freedom came from Europe, viz, France and Italy. For both, Bankim's image of the mother Durga and Vivekananda's of Kali served to give shape and form to the extreme need to defend one's country heroically. For both it was a shift away from a masculine ideal to a feminine one. For Aurobindo's invitation into an Aryan revival as a nationalist agenda first took place in western India where the ideal was one of a male warrior like Shivaji. Shakti as a political ideal of swadeshi certainly was specific to Bengali culture, fed by the literary experiments of Bankimchandra and the Kali cult of Ramakrishna, popularised by Swami Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita. "I know my country as my mother, I adore her, worship her," wrote Aurobindo Ghosh, the revolutionary. He accepted Bankim's periodisation of Indian history through the mother goddess icon. He wanted to rescue the mother from being denounced by the Rakshasa (demon) in the form of British rule:

I know my country as my mother, I bow to her, I respect her. If a Rakshasa sits on the body of the mother and tries to suck blood from her, what does the son do? Sit and eat with ease;...or run to the mother's rescue? [Tripathi 1967: 42].

Commenting on Bankim's contribution to political thought Bepin Chandra Pal invokes a vivid, though unselfconscious presentation of the womb image we had discussed earlier:

Just as the foetus lives in the mother's womb, each of us is living in the womb of the Societal mother. Just as mother's blood builds up the foetus, the mother's vitality protects the life of the child in the womb and gives it strength, the strength of the society derived from the wealth, knowledge, religion becomes the vehicle and resting place for each of us and lends justification to our individual existence.

The sense of personalised well-being generated by the warm affection of the mother is beyond the reach of an impersonal concept of a 'nation'. This is how the nationalist revolutionaries appropriated the mother image into thin politics of heroism.

The visual symbol of the swadeshi nationalism, *Bharat Mata* by Abanindranath Tagore, was a blend of Bengali women with her conchshell bangle and the image of *Shri*, the harvest goddess of prosperity. The picture was immediately appropriated the nationalist discourse in Sister Nivedita's commentary revealing her usual mythopoeic imagination.

This is the first masterpiece, in which an Indian artist has actually succeeded in disengaging, as it were, the spirit of the motherland,—giver of faith and learning, of clothing and food—and portraying her, as she appears to the eyes of her children [Works III 58].

She is the familiar Bengali woman, defamiliarised by the spiritual halo, four arms and the lotuses at her feet. The aggressiveness of the Hindu Shakti is certainly muted in this emblem—she is more to be identified with the ideal of Bangalakshmi propounded by yet another swadeshi move-

ment intellectual Ramendra Sundar Trivedi. It was he who had involved the women of Bengal in the anti-partition Swadeshi of 1905 by giving the call of 'Arandhan' (no cooking).

Tagore's patriotic songs about the motherland have resonated through the cultural fabric of Bengal. Writing about the theme of motherhood as a mode of representing nationalism I realised that it was the songs that came flooding to my mind. In the words of the historian of Swadeshi movement, quoting Yeat's memorable line, a 'terrible beauty' had indeed been born in swadeshi Bengal [Sarkar, 1973: 296].

Ullaskar Datta, a young revolutionary on trial for his life in Alipore held the court spellbound by singing one of the songs of Tagore that can draw tears even today.

Blessed is my birth in this land
Blessed is my birth, O my mother, in having
loved you [see Sarkar, 1973: 293].

Apart from nationalist euphoria, the colonial experience was also refracted in Bengal at the turn of the century as the concern of a male child for a neglected mother. As D L Roy, another nationalist poet, wrote Bengal, my mother, my muse, my country
Why is your face so sad, hair uncombed?

So powerful was the rhetoric of motherland in the swadeshi nationalism that more than half a century later, the liberation movement of Bangladesh could bring it alive. They took as their battle cry a tender swadeshi song of Tagore:

My golden Bengal, I love you
Your sky and winds have played music
to my ears forever.

Language was one of the main issues of the movement, as a result, mother tongue became, literally, the mother's tongue:

The words in your mouth are like nectar to
my ear
O my mother

Motherhood was the most significant emblem, that was specific to Bengali culture which offered the kind of root that the early nationalists needed. Yet at the same time it will be wrong to think of this representation as an uncontentious domain. Tagore's representation of motherhood eschewed, as far as possible, the Hindu revivalist tones of the mother goddess—he was more inclined to present her as the natural land, her soil, and fruit inspired him more effectively. At least in one presentation of a mother, i e, Anandamaya in *Gora* Tagore has given his note of dissent to Hindu orthodoxy [Bhattacharya 1989: 56].

In a memorable letter to Pulinbehari Sen, Tagore reports of the occasion when he had been approached by Bepin Chandra Pal to write a song combining the Durga form with that of the goddess who was the motherland to celebrate their special autumnal worship of Durga. Tagore felt he could not compromise his own religious conviction and write such a song for a puja. Instead, he wrote his memorable song.

O the enchanter of the Universal mind,
O mother
The land washed by the radiant rays of the
sun.

Tagore did not wish to transcend the

legitimate limits of the natural mother even though it displeased Bepin Pal. The price that the Swadeshi movement had paid in Hinduising the nationalist movement is made clear by Tagore in *Ghare Bairey* [1916]. In 1937, writing to Nehru about the appropriateness of 'Vande Mataram' as a national anthem, he does mention the threat to Muslim susceptibilities in the original context in which the song was located in the novel. Nevertheless he felt the first two stanzas had enough broad humanitarian appeal. It was Tagore who had set it to tune and sung it to an early session of the Indian National Congress.

IV

How do we, as feminists, view this phase of one's, own history? Was it, as the nationalists claimed, a process of authentication, for a fulfilment of the search for one's own identity? Or, was it just a manipulative device of an attempt to set up a counter hegemony which hardly changed the rules of the game?

The kind of divisiveness that this ideology implied, had far reaching implications. By abstracting Hindu goddesses as the motherland what did this universalist sounding ideology have to say to the Muslim sensibility? By extolling an ideology that apparently rested on a show of the empowering of women, it was ultimately a way of reinforcing a social philosophy of deprivation for women. It was a signal to women to sacrifice everything for their menfolk. The internalisation of this so-called ideal that nationalism put up for women simply reinforced the traditional notion that the fruition of women's lives lay in producing heroic sons. The nationalist ideology, therefore, simply appropriated this orthodox bind on women's lives by glorifying it. This renewed ideological legitimacy made it even more difficult for women to exercise their choice or autonomy in the matter. Bengali mothers had to contend with the unspoken call to renounce any other form of self-fulfilment. Child-bearing and nurturing became the only social justification of women's lives. Without any control over her own reproductive powers, this amounted to a form of slavery, however magisterial it may have been made to look. Numerous women died, trying to produce yet another son. Numerous women were deserted for their failure to produce a male child.

Nor did it end with childbirth. The ideal of motherhood permeated the entire life style of mothers in colonial Bengal. If they were unfed or uncared for, this became their great claim to social recognition and fame—their distinct superiority over their well fed western counterparts.

I can see some eyebrows shooting up, from within the rank of feminists themselves. Is this not a denigration of your own womenfolk, a reductive exercise in curbing the supreme status given to Bengali women as mothers? This kind of feminism would welcome a strict division of spheres, for within the household of a joint family the 'antahpur' (the inner domain) was an exclusive domain of women. Did not Bengal realise the utopia of sisterhood in its

'andarmahal' (the inner apartments). Was the affective domain of so elaborately worked out in the specificity of Bengali culture not an adequate compensation for the deprivation to which the women are submitted?

This is the kind of essentialist approach to womanhood that the present analysis would like to contest by focusing on the genesis of such a *weltanschauung* in a given historical moment. It was the political need of the hour that made the nationalists take up the myth. It was the compulsions of that brand of politics again that helped to unify the religion, the social and the aesthetic domain. Innumerable novels, poems and songs glorified the Bengali mother for her overweening affection. So infectious was this motherhood virus, that occasionally she had to be rebuked for spoiling her sons:

O you infatuated mother
You have brought up seven crows of sons
as Bengalis, not as human beings.

Overnurturance can be socially counter-productive, hence the ideal of Shakti with which mothers were supposed to fill up their sons. The relationship, however, remained instrumental. As Tagore had once said in a different context, "You will earn the merit but the penance of starvation will be performed by them"?

One reads a distinct male anxiety in the glorification of motherhood—the need for authentication and valour in the face of better organised cultural order of the rulers. The legitimacy that it accorded was not to the daughters but to the sons of the mother. Socially and ideologically the glorified Indian mother belonged to the world of myth. Where it touched reality, apart from the indirect sense of power, it may have given to a few exceptional Bengali women, the ideology of motherhood strengthened the social practice of hidden exploitation of women. It made negative contribution to the lives of women. Empowered by her male progeny, Bengali mothers thought little of neglecting daughters and torturing daughters-in-law. Bengali mothers upheld the hierarchy of patriarchal control within the family. No wonder she was mythicised as a symbol of order.

Notes

[The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Chandreyee Niyogi in compiling the material of this paper and for translating the passage from *Anandamath*.]

1 How deeply entrenched the notion of motherhood as the 'ultimate identity' of women was, may be seen in the following report of a conversation with the nationalist novelist Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay by his friend and poet Radharani Devi.

He looked at me with a hard glare: "what is the ultimate destiny of women, answer". We were all embarrassed before his burning look...

In an iccold voice he said, "mother. The motherly affection is the ultimate identity of the race of women."

He looked at me still with his piercing look.

[Sharatchandra, *Man and Art*] It was Radharani Devi who was entrusted with completing *Shesher Parichay* (*The Ultimate Identity*), a novel Sharatchandra did not live to complete.

2 Abanindranath Tagore, the painter of 'Mother India' had immortalised the triumph of the good queen in his children's story *Kniner Putul* (*The Milk Doll*). What is interesting is that her main aide, a monkey, rescues her by tricking 'Sasthi', a local Bengali goddess of fertility.

3 See Ashish Nandy, 'Woman versus Womanliness in India' in *At the Edge of Psychology* (Delhi, OUP, 1980.) There is an attempt at glossing over the nature of oppression on women in India here that makes one uneasy. Nandy says, I have already said that in India, competition, aggression, power, activism and intrusiveness are not so clearly associated with masculinity. In fact, in mythology and folklore, from which norms often come for traditionally undefined social situations, many of these are as frequently associated with women. The fantasy of a castrating, phallic woman is also always round the corner in India's inner world (p 42).

No wonder Nandy goes on to talk about 'the psychological benefits of being a victim' (p 43): The present investigation takes its stand on the realisation of how much of the 'inner world' is really the product of patriarchal ideology.

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