



Significance of “Mother” and “Motherhood” in Making of Indian Nation

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1. Introduction

The idea of an Indian civilisation and subsequently a “nation” isn’t a colonial or a post-colonial but has loosely existed over many decades. However, the solidification of the sentiment of nationality has been a product of colonial subjugation and a nationalist striving to establish India as an independent entity.

The allegorical figure of the nation as the mother isn’t an invention but a re-discovery of what the figure of the “mother” stood for and an application of the ideas into the nationalist framework. Since ancient times, the notion of Indian feminine divinity has been attributed to the form of the “Mother”. The mother is ascribed with all qualities that are fundamental to existence like fertility, care giving etc. For instance, one of the master pieces of Indus Valley art is the image of the Mother Goddess (Nandagopal, 2019).

This essay traces the icon of the mother from the late colonial to the post-independence period, thereby exploring the significance of mother and motherhood in the making of the Indian nation. Beginning from the mapping of the Indian nation in the form of a female body to extending the maternal metaphor to linguistics and national symbols (e.g.: cow), the essay tries to analyse all forms of the iconography of the “mother”. Not just limited to iconography, the essay also tries to understand how the metaphor of the “mother” had real life implications on the conditions created for women. The essay finally tries to understand the propagation of the idea of the nation as the mother through the case study of a film “Mother India”. Parallel to such an imagery this essay also tries to highlight the heterogeneity within the homogenising iconography and the cause and implications of such a representation.

2. The “Nation” as “Mother”

For nationalist thinkers, the Motherland wasn’t a mere idea or fancy but a distinct personality. Ramaswamy (2001) remarks how this distinct personality came to be categorically represented as “Mother India”, leading to the emergence of a visual image of India as a motherland and also as ‘mother’, ‘goddess’ and a ‘woman’. These ideas of believing/reinforcing India as Bharat Mata reaffirm to its citizens that India isn’t just a hollow physical-geographical land but rather an entity for which its citizens can/should sacrifice their lives.

The potency of the symbol of mother as a representation of the nation lay in the fact that a pure woman was seen as the creator and protector of home which is why home was demarcated as a refuge where the colonised could take refuge from the colonial ruler. This binary opposition between home and the world pointed towards the demarcation of the domestic as the area of nationalist resistance to colonial power (Sen, 1993).

This ideological construct of the mother was dynamic and unmarked by political values and could evoke a wide range of emotions. For instance, Bose (2017) talks about how the symbol of “Srinkhalita

Bharatmata”, the Mother bound in chains, was a widely used emotive image in nationalist posters and the contrast between the way mother had been, what mother has become or been reduced to was quite enough to fire nationalist ire. In addition to her glorious past and her sorry present, the utopia of what mother will be constituted a powerful temporal sequence that boosted nationalist morale.

By 1915-1916 the idea of India as a motherland already had become prevalent especially among patriotic Indians. These imaginaries were not only mental but also portrayed in form of graphics in forms of magazines and posters. Furthermore, phrases like Bharat Mata ki Jai and Vande Mataram were also used. Around 1920s onwards, this iconography of India being depicted as Bharat Mata became common. Bharat Mata implied Goddess of polity and territory (Ramaswamy, 2001).

The appeal of the figure of the “mother” as a representation of the nation lay not just in her divinity alone but by her identification with citizen subjects. However, even though the ideologue of nationalism adopted the symbol of “mother” as a supreme unifying entity, yet the patriarchal context in which such an iconography was established was clearly visible. ‘Matribhakti’ was seen as the monopoly of the sons and the mother-daughter relationship was especially sparse in early nationalist discourse (Bose, 2017).

3. Different meanings associated with the symbol of “Mother”

Gupta (2001) notes how the icon of the mother have been worked into narratives of nation, language and cow in the late colonial period. This was done so as to sharpen the contours of a community identity. Gupta (2001) through a study of Hindu publicists of UP tries to delaminate how and why the metaphor of the mother was used in multiple fields in late colonial India and how it proved to be significant in the making of the nation. The metaphor was depicted through symbols (Gau mata, Bharat Mata, Saraswati mata) which were a mix of modern scientism and emotional appeal of the symbol of the mother and was evoked to aid men in the nations’ service (Gupta, 2001).

4. Icon of mother into Narratives of a nation

Gupta (2001) highlights how the identity of the country and the nation was often expressed in terms of devotion to the “Hindu” icon of Bharat Mata. In the early 1900s, Bharat Mata, in addition to being a distinct personality took on an entity of a detailed physical map, thereby becoming a metaphor for a fixed, bounded space. Such an imagery was constructed by the nationalists to combine “science with emotions and modernity with traditional beliefs”. This mapped representation of mother India culminated in the formation of a “secular” Bharat Mata Mandir by Shivprasad Gupt, a staunch nationalist, and a wealthy Vaishya. The image of janani janambhumi was created using marble; the sculptors were all Hindus; the marble carving was detailed and minute (Gupta, 2001).

The temple attempted to create a composite religious and national identity vis-à-vis high and low caste Hindus and Hindus and Muslims. For this purpose, an inter-caste dining was also organised. The irony of such an attempt to create a unified identity lay in the fact that the temple used overwhelming upper caste symbols; the inter-caste dining was preceded by giving doms and chamars sunlight soaps to cleanse themselves in the nearby well and enter the temple; and the inauguration of the temple was marked by a ceremony performed by orthodox Brahmins. Daud Ali argues that such a representation pointed towards a new political reality of bourgeoisie nationalism (Gupta, 2001).

The question here arises if such a predominant Hindu iconography led to establishing the base for a Hindu nation than an Indian nation. The creation of a mapped representation further led to the envisioning of Bharat Mata as a sovereign territory with set boundaries and a fixed map, thus leading to the creation of a true, complete and pure picture of India. This creation of a fixed geographical space was crucial to the imagination of the Indian nation in its totality. This further reinforced the idea of a loyal political citizenry, who were devoted to the service of the nation and attained their identity within

the metaphor of the boundary. The dutiful children of this icon of mother were articulated as Hindu sons who was further promoted as constituting an ideal Indian (Gupta, 2001).

Mother as a map being so encompassing had to submerge separate identities. But this had political implications. In some sense, this map as mother defined national identity in terms of Hindu piety and activism. Thus, Bharat Mata temple can be seen as a mark of confusion and conflation between Hindu/Indian/nation. Such an ambiguity might have a counter impact on the unifying force of nationalism as such an imagery alienated Muslims considerably (Gupta, 2001).

5. Icon of mother into Narratives of a language

Language became a symbol of community creation from the late 19th century. However, the Hindi movement and the assertion of Hindi by the Hindu upper caste was an attempt for the Hindu literati to carve out a culturally hegemonic role in the new nation. Efforts in this direction involved Sanskritisation of Hindi, removing Persio-Arabic words and marginalising spoken forms of Hindi like Avadhi and Braj. Here, the attribution of femininity to language came to be seen as both revitalising and degenerating (Gupta, 2001).

The Hindi language was personified as a Hindu mother, a powerful mother goddess and the hope and soul of India. To create a sense of homogeneity, it was linked with Sanskrit (by calling Hindi Sanskrit's granddaughter) which was seen as a unifying factor in ancient times. It was assumed that all other languages had a common source in Sanskrit (Gupta, 2001).

The attempt was not just limited to personifying mother but to determine the nature of Hindi "as a mother" and this was primarily done in opposition to Urdu. Hindi was seen as a respectable Hindu wife or a Brahmin nurturing matron while Urdu was seen as a strumpet or a wanton Muslim prostitute. Such an imagery was extended to limiting teaching girls Hindi as women were being emblematic of the purity of Hindu society. Ironically, the attack on Urdu wasn't solely because it was seen as vulgar but because it was seen as effeminate (Gupta, 2001).

Hindi on the other hand wasn't a homogenous language and there were various 'bolis' prevalent. Various gendered arguments were presented to assert the dominance of a particular 'boli'. Braj literature focusing on the lives and loves of Krishna was seen as unfit for the consumption of women whereas Khari boli lacked any erotic tradition and was seen as fit to convey the nationalist message. Braj bhasha was seen as having feminine undertones while Khari boli was distinguished by reason, suggesting manly feelings (Gupta, 2001).

6. Icon of mother into Narratives of a physical entity (cow)

The cow was the sacred symbol of the Hindus and came to be represented as the mother of all Hindus and a Hindu identity and nationality, requiring protection from Hindus (Gupta, 2001). The cow as a national symbol typified the antagonism between the Hindu and Muslim community, further exacerbating the differences and raising the question: Whose nationalism did such a symbol sought to solidify? Furthermore, the economic appeal of the Hindus to preserve the Gau Mata was inherently linked to an economic boycott of Muslims.

The potency of the imagery of the cow as a mother lay in the figurative representation of her material body as an allegory for the nation. Her 'womb' could provide a home to all, she could feed her sons with milk and ghee, making them stronger. The imagery of the cow gained additional importance for her association with domesticity. She was seen as a foster mother whose udders were a metonym for nourishment and livelihood. The cow along with the woman of the family signified a domestic space, where no outside influence was tolerated, solidifying the cultural/spiritual realm of the national strife. The mother cow gave a sanctity to family, community and the nation. (Gupta, 2001).

7. From the metaphor of the mother to the creation of an idealised motherhood/womanhood

The aforementioned iconography of the mother brought about the notions of an idealised, empowered imagery of the mother. This was studied by Samita Sen (1993) through an analysis of the metaphor of the “mother” in Bengali nationalist discourse. Questions of gender and nationalism had a common ancestor: the social reform movement of the 19th century. Common to all these was the creation of a multi-layered, empowered image of a mother who was valorised as the creator and protector of the sanctuary of home and by being a good and chaste wife she was the iconic representation of the nation. This iconic representation was a by-product of the abolition of barbarous practices against women like sati, polygamy etc. and also a potent force which contributed to this process of eradication. Women’s emancipation in the nationalist discourse resulted in national achievement and regeneration with women signifying social and national superiority (Sen, 1993).

Sen (1993) notes how within this iconography, the lower caste and peasant woman remained on the fringes of the discussion. Moreover, the modern woman was designated as corrupt while the ethicised image of the pure Hindu woman became a symbol of the wellbeing of the nation (Sen, 1993). The moral health of the nation was dependent on the conformity of women to domestic run of housework (Sen, 1993).

The domestic role emphasised on the necessity of education for women as it was considered vital for woman to become good mothers and housewives. The content of education however focused on midwifery, childbearing etc. with the primary justification for education being to prevent the social harms inflicted by an ignorant housewife or mother, to enable them to train their children for nation building (Sen, 1993).

Sen (1993) highlights how in the 1920s and 30s, the health of the children was deteriorating resulting in high mortality rates and thus the concept of “enlightened motherhood” came to the fore inducing an urgent need to promote maternity and child welfare to provide a great impetus to the preservation of national life and vigour. The blame for degrading health was shifted to poor and working-class women for they were not educated enough to take care of children. Therefore, educating them became a priority (Sen, 1993). Their education was drawn from the already popular format in Britain called “mother craft”. According to mothercraft, an ideal homemaker was to be constructed through scientific advice on home and child care.

Mothercraft had various facets: both positive and negative. The actual physical and biological capacity for childbearing was seen to be endangered by factory or other strenuous work. There was also a simultaneous emphasis on the actual dangers to children left untended by working mothers. On a more positive side the establishment of voluntary welfare centres to instruct mothers on scientific wisdom of motherhood would prove more valuable than maternity allowances in cash for working mothers (Sen, 1993).

The notion of mother craft applied most directly to women in factories, plantation and mines. It was believed that factory work was detrimental to women’s childbearing capacity due to extreme strenuous work. One solution to this problem was the removal of women from industrial work but it was realised that it was almost impossible to remove women from industries, plantations and mines. As a result a compromise was decided where working-class women were to be taught mother craft and thereby to lessen the harmful effects of ignorance and neglect on children (Sen, 1993).

However, the nationalist empowerment of women as mothers justified the denial of other economic, social and political entitlement to women which the biggest irony (Sen, 1993).

8. Mother and post independent nation building

The allegorical representation of the nation as a mother continued even after independence, making itself visible in broadcast media as cinema, adapting itself to the framework of nation building (primarily in terms of Nehruvian socialism).

Schulze (2002) traces such a representation through an analysis of the interlink between the film 'Mother India' and Nehruvian politics of socialism. Schulze (2002) writes. The film is a hymn of sacrifice and suffering idealising the struggle of India's rural population as a selfless strive, thereby creating the economic... and moral foundation of the.... Indian nation (Schulze, 2002. P 73).

For Schulze (2003), the Indian woman became the essential mental, emotional and pictorial spectacle of the nation. She traces the reason from the tradition of nationalist metaphors of independence struggle and also from the fact that the symbol of the mother could enforce a national consciousness of essentially being one. For instance, in case of the movie mother India, the audience witnessing mother India's plight is reminded of the real-life struggles for survival and meeting one's physical needs. (Schulze, 2002).

The imagined nation and her icon were so removed from reality that it neither touched upon the socio-economic and political morality of the Indian women nor does it sympathised with the plight of peasants (Schulze, 2002). Also, a ground level analysis revealed that the status of women had not improved. Thus, the post-colonial construction of the mother remained to induce attitudes negating material needs. The main purpose was to address the nationalist moralist; to celebrate the seed and tears on which modern India is built (Schulze, 2002).

9. (DIS) Figuring the Nation

The semiological sign of the mother to represent the nation changed with historical and political contexts. Sandhya Shetty (1995) focuses on the ways in which various authors have approached the iconography of the mother and its actual implication on women from the colonial to post-colonial times. Shetty (1995) mentions how Mayo in her article talks about the pathological health conditions of women in India in a context where the "mother" was assigned supreme and divine qualities. Mayo pathologises the female reproductive body and talks about how the figure of the mother was valued more than the actual "mother". Moreover, Shetty (1995) brings in Partha Chatterjee's argument to highlight how the emergence of the "mother" in the Indian national context deviated the society from the "women's question". To further understand the disfigurement of the iconography of the mother Shetty (1995) talks about Mahashweta Devi's story Stanadayini. In this story, Yashoda, a subaltern woman who feeds the sons of rich Haldar household. At a stage of her life, she gets infected with breast cancer but she has no one to claim her. This story signifies the oppression of the gendered subaltern and a "reminder of the materiality of the mother's body's, which the patriarchal mobilization of the Hindu divine mother has effaced" (Shetty, 1995, p.67).

10. The Iconography of Bharat Mata

The attribution of "mother" to represent the nation can be analysed from the Marxist lenses. Mothers perform the crucial function of reproduction. For Marx, women's primary role comprised of procreation along with child bearing to raise "sons" of the nation. The allegorical representation of the nation as mother created an idealised figure of the nourishing mother. Such an iconography not only excluded a lot of lower caste and working women but also deified women to such an extent that any deviations from the idealised iconography was seen as a form of moral decay and degeneration.

Another way of viewing the significance of "mother" and "motherhood" can be seen from the lenses of Marx's dominant ideology. The ideology of the dominant group dictates the socio-cultural paradigm of the period. In the case of nation making, this dominant ideology was that of Hinduism, with the icon

of Mother India deriving from Hindu traditions. Moreover, this dominant Hindu ideology wasn't a homogenous one, often differing between that of upper caste and lower caste, men and women etc. However, such an iconography was not based on the principle of mutual exclusion and the primary intent was to evoke a sense of a national identity. And this particular intent might be the reason why the antagonism to such a signifier was contained and the pathological figurations came to be idealised. The significance of "mother" and "motherhood" in nation building is a dynamic process and changes with a change in the political context. In the wake of industrialisation, women provided cheap labour and thus the "ideal mother" concept expanded to include women working for survival, even though there existed hostility in the way such women were viewed. They were attributed blame for declining general health of their children. But the industrialists' interests ensured that they were not removed from the domain of workforce but rather work was reconciled to align with their "responsibility" of motherhood.

With the advent of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation reforms, the iconography of women also underwent change. Exposure to western ideas lead to an increased sense of self and individuality. The traditional figure of the silent, nourishing and reproductive mother gave way to a modern, individualistic yet rooted, identity of a mother in India today. Even now, however, the dominant archetype of a selfless mother still exists. To assert her identity, she has to navigate between tradition and modernity, negotiating with the patriarchal representation in her life (Anand, 2001).

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