Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal
Jasodhara Bagchi

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 preconditions 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'

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 latter appropriation by the patriarchy [1986: 15]. This appropriation has taken many different forms in different societies which display little similarity with the European model to 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, then 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 plays of capitalist patriarchy has been the simultaneous privatisation and institutionalisation of motherhood. Loving nurturing mothers and healthy babies are the most prized showpieces 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 produce 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 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 most clearly expressed in colonial Bengal 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 the power to create an image of 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 preconditions 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 and a move towards the condemnation of 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.

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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 out. The mother was identified as the sign of the ultimate identity of Bengali women. It was an excellent ploy to keep women out of 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. It was an excellent ploy to keep women out of the nationalist ideology.

The ideology of motherhood in Bengal is a complex phenomenon that needs a full length treatment to involve studies of ethnography, history, politics, literature, mythography and semiotics. What I propose to do here is provisionally to cut a slice of this jungle and consider motherhood in Bengal as an affectionate mother, ever ready to provide comfort and solace to the children. The term 'mother' is not a term of endearment but a term of social obligation.

The Bengali cultivators even to this day is one of the races, Semitic, Hellenic, Teutonic and Nordic alike. But what singles India out in this respect is the continued history of the Hindu mother goddess mentioned by Das Gupta as Durga, Chandi or Kali, who occupies a very important position in mainstream religious practices.

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 Bachelo, 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 these goddesses can be found in most early societies.

For the creators of Vedic literature, the Aryans who as Sukumari Bhatacharjhi has shown so eloquently, were warthoppers of human race. It was not mean that matter that Aditi the mother goddess is seen as the mother of sun [Bhatacharjhi, 1970: 160]. The other Vedic mother goddess mentioned by Das Gupta as being of more immediate significance for Bengal is Pritivi the mother goddess, who in the later Upanishads gets identified with Shri or Lakshmi, goddess of harvest and prosperity [52]. Pritivi, as Das Gupta reminds us, is constantly associated with the male deity Dyus (sky) [52]. However, in this form, she is the 'field' to be insinuated 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 propitiatory ceremony, and is held at the end of summer and the beginning of the rains. It is a sympo-
ism of the patriarchal hold over such mother cult practice that while the original per-
fession of the Shakti image possibly owed a great deal of its identity with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, the Puranas with the female principle of Maya, 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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 Rama-krishna, 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 transition into the anti-colonial struggle. She began 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 crowned in her son’s worship—she is the bringer of sanctuary and peace. [Nivedita, 1987: 16].

In the cult of mother worship in the west, centring around Virgin Mary has emphasized the association “of all that is tender and complete” of womanhood is concentrated there as the mother earth, embodied 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 [Kanchanavil 11: 80].

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 goddess Durga? Bungamati and the 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.

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.[30]

Sister Nivedita, an iconographer of no mean stature, goes on to assess 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-seek 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 changing 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-seek image comes alive in a song by Ramprasad:

When 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 nation’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 has once admonished someone not to say “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 devotion 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.

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 masculinising 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.

This echoes what Vivekananda, who 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 word 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. [Nivekananda, Vol 8: 57].

Woman’s reproductive domain in the west, thus abstracted, even fetishised how Bankim Sarker suggests [Sarkar, 1987: 201]. Since the spiritual domain was the weapon in the hands of the nationalist, the glorification of motherhood was the doubled refined spirituality that was used as a major tool for political domination of 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 content [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 that he called the motherland; and god is called mother. This motherland; and god is called mother. [Chatterjee 1989: 251]. 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 content [Sarkar, 1973]. It helped to spread the message of swadeshi, both economic and cultural which erupted in Bengal at the turn of the century.

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• thus creates one of the most powerful icons...Bangadarshan

Bangi

the evolution of the Indian society in the ten

metaphor of the mother goddess as the

tion of India’ question is to be found in the

mother goddess as

Dasamahavidya

and sees

Bankim interprets the ten forms of the

famous series of Mother images mentioned

in Anandamati, 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 god-
dess, corresponding to past, present and the

future of Indian history. In his presentation

of the present misery Bankim Chandra col-
lapses Muslim as well as British side 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 perfec-
tion. Mahendra asked the hermit: ‘Who is

she?’

Hermit: ‘Mother as she was’.

M: ‘What do you mean?’

H: ‘mother that was, mother

that is, mother that will be’

is supposed to cover, of

mother, nationalists helped to domesticate

One of the most valiant of all animals—show us the

enemy of man lies vanquished at her feet

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 adora-

tion. ‘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].

In an early Sanskrit text of fifth/sixth cen-
tury AD we get a reference to the presiding

deity of Bharat well famed as the

Bharati-lata (Mother India). To local 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

worship of these two mother goddesses.

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 feminine heroism which was later

politicised by the 'extremist nationalists, set-

ting the ideological tone of so-called ter-

rorism 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

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British in India, and Aurobindo Ghosh whose original notion of freedom came from Europe, via France and Italy. For both, 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 heart, then 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 unconscious 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 motherland have resonated through the generations. The symbol of the swadeshi motherland was specific to Bengali culture, fed by the literary experiments of Bankimchandra and the Kali cult of Kamakunhi, popularised by Swami Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita as a political ideal of swadeshi cer-

Tage's patriotic songs about the motherland had 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 Year's memorable time, a 'terrible bee' had indeed been born in swadeshi Bengal [Sarkar, 1973: 296].

Ullas 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 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.
andarmahal (the inner apartments). Was the effective domain of so elaborately work-
ed out in the specificity of Bengali culture not an adequate compensation for the deprivation to which the women are subjected?

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 nationalist movement.

It was Radharani Devi who was entrusted with completing Sheher Parichay (The Ultimate Identity), a novel Sharanchandra did not live to complete. It was Sharanchandra Tagore, the painter of 'Mother India' had immortalised the triumph of the good queen in his children's story Knier Putul ('The Milk Doll'). What is interesting is that her main aide, a man named 'Sashiki', is the local Bengali goddess of fertility. 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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