



*Bharat Mata*,  
circa 1902–5  
by Abanindranath Tagore  
Water colour and wash on paper  
Rabindra Bharati, Calcutta

## MOTHER INDIA

*The nation's identity lay in the culture and more specifically in its womanhood. In the changed political and social environment the image of womanhood was more important than the reality. Historians and laymen would complete the process by ensuring through continued writings in the twentieth century, that the image also came to be perceived as the reality.<sup>1</sup>*

### *the woman as nation*

A unique icon of the woman is introduced early in the 20th century, investing her with the powers of a new goddess. An image of such luminosity and resonance that for ten decades she has continued to influence the minds and hearts of the Indian people, of her politicians, activists, writers, artists and film makers. Over the 20th century two temples have been built to enshrine her image. Conceived among certain members of the intellectual elite as a *secular* concept, she is now embedded in the Hindu consciousness of the popular imagination. The fascinating history of her continuing transformation becomes the subject of this chapter.

Political sensibility as much as Indian aesthetics is transformed in the first decade by the patriotic fervour of the *swadeshi* movement sweeping the country. A concrete realisation of India's aspirations is found in the painting of the motherland titled *Bharat Mata*, conceived by Abanindranath Tagore.<sup>2</sup> This first model becomes our point of departure, raising interesting questions and contradictions on the imaging of the woman-as-nation. Although she signifies the emergence of a new India, she has been treated by most writers as a mere point of reference for the politics of nationalism. She deserves, in my opinion, critical re-examination.

Abanindranath constructs his icon in water colour, in delicate wash tints of saffron, pale greens and luminous whites, eschewing the thick colours and realistic effects of oil paint in the Western idiom. He chooses to work in a technique indigenous to India, in colours which are considered auspicious. His archetype heralds an ideal of the Indian woman, endowed with a "golden body", a fair complexion and fine features that bespeak her lineage. With feet more delicate than the white lotuses strewn below her, she rises gently to her full stature. Like our goddesses of old, she is empowered with four hands, in which she holds not weapons but the four promised symbols for a reconstructed India: food (*anna*), clothing (*vastra*), a manuscript for education (*siksha*) and beads for spiritual salvation (*diksha*).

The woman is the pivotal focus in the painting—as much as an icon or a symbol is construed in the Indian tradition for purposes of meditation (*dhyana*). Remarkably, there is absolutely no movement, no aggression in her figure or her calm demeanour. She stands in equilibrium, in the pose of *samabhanga*, holding out a promise of what is to come, not of the realities of the day. There is no narrative here, no background to relate her story—nothing except the silhouette of the green earth which curves away from her and the vast, open sky which envelops her in its golden radiance... Unlike the primeval goddess Durga who bursts forth from a mountain armed with weapons to slay the demon buffalo Mahishasura, there is no drama to her emergence, no ensuing conflict,

monumental image of Vishnu, seated with the resplendent image of the Mother on his lap. Worshipped by all, she is described as a bewitching enchantress (*Mobinimurti*), more beautiful than the goddesses Lakshmi and Sarasvati who are consorts to Vishnu and appear beside her. In the second chamber he witnesses Jagaddhatri, ruling the wild animals of the forest, gifted with all the riches of the earth and identified as the primordial Mother-that-was in the past. In trepidation he moves next to behold the black, naked and terrifying image of the goddess Kali. The hermit explains that this is what the Mother-has-become today. “She has been robbed of everything, that is why she is naked. Today the whole country is a graveyard, that is why our Mother wears a garland of dead skulls”. With the hermit Mahendra at last ascends until their eyes are dazzled by light. “They saw a ten-armed golden idol (*pratima*) in the middle of a marble temple, laughing in the light of the morning sun. The hermit bowed to her and said, ‘This is what our Mother will become’”. Initiation into the cult of the Mother is completed, and the narrative proceeds to deeds of patriotic fervour.<sup>25</sup>

It is this image of the Motherland as ‘revealed’ in *Anandamath* which deeply stirs the *swadeshi* movement, more than two decades after Bankim had conceived her. *Janani janmabumischa swargadapi garyasi*: “the Mother and the Motherland are more glorious than the heavens”, the words by the hermit to Mahendra after the song, become the solemn oath of allegiance to move thousands to believe in the future of a new nation. *Bande Mataram* was first sung by Rabindranath Tagore at the National Congress in 1896. On August 7th 1905 it was uttered

(Below, left)

*Durga annihilating the Demon Mahisasura*

Kalighat Painting, 19th century

Water colour on paper

Collection: Chester Herwitz

(Below, right)

*Jagaddhatri*,

Kalighat Painting, 19th century

Water colour on paper

Collection: Chester Herwitz



as a ‘mantra’ in the historic Town Hall meeting, in taking the vow of *swadeshi* and resolution to boycott foreign goods. Youthful votaries moved in procession through the streets with the slogan, then banned by the British Government. The *Dawn* reported that it had become “a battle cry and a divine inspiration” whereby “the streets and lanes of Calcutta and the rest of the province resound with the solemn watchword.”<sup>26</sup>

In this same year Bankimchandra’s image inspired Sri Aurobindo’s leaflet on *Bhawani Mandir*, written and circulated by him in 1905–6. In his vision the regeneration of India could only be effected by the energy of *Shakti*, given finite form in Bhawani, the Mother of strength. From 1906 to 1908 Aurobindo published a revolutionary paper also called *Bande Mataram*, in which he pays tribute in 1907:

The third and supreme service of Bankim to his nation was that he gave us the vision of our Mother... it is not till she takes shape as a great Divine and Maternal Power in a form of beauty that can dominate the mind and seize the heart that these petty fears and hopes vanish in the all-absorbing passion for the Mother and her service...<sup>27</sup>

This apotheosis of the Motherland takes place not merely in the east but all over the country. It receives overwhelming ovation in the south, where Subramania Bharati’s song of freedom is addressed to the new icon. Despite her being an ‘Aryan’ goddess from the north and his representing Dravidic sentiments from the south, he is inspired by Bankimchandra in describing all-India in verse.<sup>28</sup>

In this charged atmosphere of a nation awakening to its identity, amidst the thundering sounds of *Bande Mataram*, the *Bharat Mata* is conceived by Abanindranath. In his personal reminiscences titled *Gharoa* and published many years later in 1941, Abanindranath recalls that his painting of the *Bharat Mata* was enlarged by a Japanese artist into a banner (*pataka*), then taken around in processions of the *swadeshi* movement. To support the movement against importing foreign cloth, his mother took to spinning on the *charkha*, and on seeing this Havell bought her a loom.<sup>29</sup> The artist recalls the context of the *swadeshi* movement which had deeply involved the Tagore family; but he glosses over the inspiration for his image. His silence is tantalising!

### *a national icon*

In its time, the emergence of *Bharat Mata* had become almost inevitable. How else, to use Anderson’s useful term, could the bonding of the ‘imagined community’ of the nation be effected, the force of a political movement be represented?<sup>30</sup> Not through reason or rhetoric alone but through the compelling and persuasive power of an icon! The compelling demand for an *icon* is graphically recorded by Rabindranath Tagore in his novel *Ghare Baire*, written a decade after the painting. From his own essays from about 1908 it is known that the poet had by then developed deep misgivings about the growing cult of the *Bharat Mata*, leading to a growing of terrorism. The tenor of his writings changes from 1908, his reservations are expressed through the rational voice of Nikhil in the novel who is averse to cultism and anarchy. But Sandip, the charismatic revolutionary who storms in to change Bimala’s life forever, adds to her growing confusion when he pleads that he has “come to worship” her as the “Shakti of our country”. Later Sandip reiterates his point as political strategy rather than his response to an actual woman, by asserting the need to visualise the motherland. “We must make a goddess of her!”<sup>31</sup>

In the discourse on nationalism, Hobsbawm proposes three inherent means of unifying a nation.<sup>32</sup> Of these, the first two of language and ethnicity could be ruled out with India's plurality of languages and cultures. This leaves one option of religious sentiment, suspect in that it might challenge the nation's monopoly and claim to the loyalty of the people. However, Hobsbawm retrieves instances of religious icons such as the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico and the Virgin of Montserrat in Catalonia, used effectively in forging a national identity. He concedes:

If religion is not a necessary mark of proto-nationality (a nation in its formative stages)... the holy icons on the other hand, are a crucial component of it, as they are of modern nationalism. They represent the symbols and rituals or common practices which alone give a palpable reality to otherwise (an) imaginary community...<sup>33</sup>

As originally conceived by Bankimchandra, the *Bharat Mata* was precisely such a 'holy' icon, invented to forge national identity. Predictably, in the discourse on power and regeneration, from writers in differing disciplines such as Sarkar on *swadeshi*, Mitter and Guha-Thakurta on nationalist art, Sunder Rajan on gender, the *Bharat Mata* is claimed as a 'nationalist' icon, empowered with a purpose of forging national unity.<sup>34</sup> Having established this claim and appropriated the image, it is dismissed in a few lines or paragraphs. She deserves, in my opinion, critical re-examination—because the painting by Abanindranath is significantly different from what might be expected, especially after the received prototype in *Anandamath*.

*Bharat Mata* exudes a very different ethos from that compelling goddess described above in *Anandamath*. True, she is beatific, bathed in light, with curving contours of the earth, full-blown lotuses and the wash of verdant greens hinting at her association with the sacred land which she personifies. The look of compassion in her eyes and the asexual treatment of her body comply with her role as the Mother. There the affinities end between Bankim's narrative/song and the picture—due to the essential difference between a woman and a goddess. Unlike that vision granted to Mahendra, the painting envisages not a ten-armed *idol* in a marble temple, equipped with weapons, but a gentle and restrained *woman* holding in her four arms the requirements for daily life. She is human, a reassuring fact. Nothing in her demeanour suggests that she could be awesome, divine, a goddess.

But that is precisely the point! Her modesty and her serenity contribute to her limitations. She is too civilised, because she is born of the *bhadralok*. She lacks passion, anger, venom. She does not carry those attributes of a martial leader which could incite a nation to revolt, as for example in the personification of *La France* by Delacroix. She would hardly fulfil the aspirations of an impassioned woman like Bimala in *Chare Baire* who gives vent to popular demand when she declares:

I am only human. I am covetous. I have anger. I would be angry for my country's sake... fascination must be supplied to me in bodily shape by my country. She must have some visible symbol casting its spell upon my mind. I would make my country a Person and call her Mother, Goddess, Durga—for whom I would redden the earth with sacrificial offerings. I am human, not divine.<sup>35</sup>



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If we were to compare *Bharat Mata* to popular icons of that time of the goddess Kali, in Battala prints from Calcutta, the dramatic contrast makes the point. A black goddess, naked and furious, with her tongue red and bloodthirsty, wearing a garland of human skulls—often white heads from this period of protest against the sahibs of the Raj—dances upon the prostrate body of Shiva. This may have been more appropriate for inspiring revolutionary fervour! As she strides forward with purpose, she embodies dynamic energy, the female principle of *shakti*. Despite the fact that she had declared Abanindranath's painting to be a masterpiece, Nivedita shows the binary forces at work when she offers us a different but potential iconography for the Mother:



*Kali*  
Lithograph from the Calcutta Art Studio, late 19th century, used as advertisement for Kali cigarettes with a political message.