



Goddesses of the Nation: Gendered Nationalism and Female Archetypes

Baishali Bhaumik

(Department of Sociology, Jadavpur University, Kolkata)

ABSTRACT - The notion of land, of one's nation has always evoked the strongest of emotions. Since the dawn of civilization, it is the memory of the soil, of one's belonging that we have carried within. It is the idea of belonging, the idea of land and home that has been closely related to the essence of a Mother and a nurturer. Land or the "mati" always had a sense of roots attached to it. The attributes pertaining to motherhood, belonging, fertility have intersected the discourse of nationalism time and again. Thus it was quite inevitable that the very notion of land would be imagined to have a gendered identity.

Keywords: nation, nationalism, women, mother, goddess

"God may be in the details, but the goddess is in the questions. Once we begin to ask them, there's no turning back" – Gloria Steinem

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I. Introduction

During the era of British rule, while the nation was already plagued with sufferings and destruction, a new age communal politics began to unfold itself. It was probably a product of the British policy that the devastated nation started engaging itself in a religious power play. It was almost as if the oppressors were introducing a certain prologue to the gashing wounds and fissures that their strategy of dividing the nation would leave behind. It was the first few pages of the communal hatred that would in course of time unravel itself. During this devastation, history ushered a period of time when the entire nation being tired of the wounds of servitude, it was bearing for years, started seething with the fire of vengeance. After years of quite suffering and oppression, a fragment of the population started rising who swore to restore the nation into its former glory. But it was not easy to awaken a nation which has been shackled for so long. Being subjected to generations of penance and sufferings, the nation couldn't find "herself" rise against such a power. Unlike the attributes of femininity attached to our nation, the oppressive power of the British reeked of rugged masculinity. Unlike the national imagery of femininity, the notion of masculinity in the nationalist context had a wider connotation. The British Power was closely related to an extreme form of masculinity which India was not familiar with. Upon their arrival to the country and subsequent capture of the land, they always thought the Indian men to lack the "proper" essence of masculinity. They were infact seen as "effeminate" as they "lacked" the archetype masculinity to revolt and stand against a foreign power. Easily suppressed, during the advent of the British invasion, their masculinity was stripped off and their land was 'manhandled' by an alien power. Their land's honor tainted and raped. Thus, it was indeed difficult for them to rise from such a state of dishonor and try to return to their days of glorious masculinity. Central to the culture and religiosity of our Nation, lay the bud of new life, the Mother who with all her being was a refuge, drops of rain in a desert.

Women as Goddess Figures

Since the dawn of civilization, women bodies have been the warzone, bleeding and wounded almost in every battle of Patriarchy. Easily violated, the female body has served as an imagined entity of honor which paved the way for acting on one's vengeance. What can be observed here is that this idea of the Women's body is starkly different from the imagery of women as Mother. Traditionally, women have been the victims and casualties of every form of national struggle. Their "bodies" have also evoked the sense of honor across almost all socio-cultural as well as religious communities. However throughout history women's body have been very conveniently made visible to evoke the essence of honor and have also been reduced to an Invisible entity when wounded. They

were simultaneously the subject of the discourse and subjected to the discourse. Nation when represented as a woman or Mother closely relate to the socially constructed ideas of honor. The age old idea that the women's body can be easily tainted and being extremely fragile were used as a national trope to evoke the lost glory. Amidst this chaos, there rose a goddess figure, a daughter of the soil embodying the attributes of a loving mother and fierce protector. An embodiment of the sufferings that her children are subjected to, this goddess figure assumed the name Bharatmata (Mother of the land).

Gender served as the metaphor for nation building. The colonial India presented the premise for a gendered nation building. The masculine hope and desire of the countrymen was stripped off by the British power. The nation needed a hope to hold onto. During these trying times, a new world of Patriarchy was born. The upper middle class of Bhadrakal and Bhadrakal. Seating on the intellectual and cultural throne, this new class felt the need to introduce an entity which would unfailingly evoke the lost hope of the fellow countrymen. According to Sumanta Banerjee, it was BankimChandra Chattopadhyay, who in his work transformed Bharatmata into a unique Goddess figure who was symbolic to the motherland and was in great despair. Her children, the fellow countrymen were indifferent to her sufferings and hence she urged them to protect their Mother who was in agony. This narrative was further strengthened when BankimChandra Chattopadhyay composed "Vande Mataram" in 1875. The song was a poetry in motion where this benign goddess urged her children to rescue her. This song evoked the desired emotions and soon became the heart of the nationalist struggle. In Rabindranath Tagore's, "Birpurush", the undertones of a simple poem about a little boy's imagination of rescuing his Mother from a gang of Dacoits, critically reflects how it is the duty of the son to rescue the Mother who has been captured. The poem goes on to reflect how the duty of a "Bir", embodying the attributes of strength and patriotism, is to save the Mother from an invasion that could violate the modesty of the Mother who is sitting inside a "palanquin". The notion of nationalism has always been critically gendered. As Historian Linda Kerber reflects on her paper, the early American Republic assigned a specific gender role to the idea of land and nation. Women embodied the essence of an archetype Mother. A mother who is fiercely protective about the children she carries in her womb. She who bears the future generations who shares the collective memory of a warm protective womb thus paving the way for the idea of brotherhood. Drawing from the socio cultural identities of the everyday life, nationalism has been assigned a certain duality.

The idea of a Mother in its very essence remains shrouded with a sense of duality. The idea of a fierce protector who would destroy everything that wants to bring harm to the children was somewhat a reflection of the European revolutionary women. In Europe this kind of gendered politics was playing its part since a longer period of time where men went to war upholding their masculinity while the women stayed at home, looked after the family and were required to stand in long queues to fetch the bread for her family. They were the archetypal mother, daughter and wife who sent their son, father or husband to the war and eagerly waited by the door longing for their return. However after years of unrecognized labor and having almost no right on the political realm of the country, they rose against this inequality and fought for their worth. It was through their uproar, a new idea of women as revolutionaries and defender of their own rights introduced themselves. They were the example of the militant women whose ideals and strength were borrowed from. It was their reflection that became topic of discussion among the circle of intelligentsia. Thus the image of a benign Mother who is shackled and is crying for help was quite different from the essence of these military women. The Bharatmata who was a reflection of the feminine grace and beauty was similar to Sita who was in her essence the mythological symbol for purity, chastity and vulnerability. However the imagery of Sita was quite soft for being the aggressive and protective Mother who would evoke the same form of aggression inside her children. Hence, it was Kali who assumed the position of the fierce Mother. With her black skin and fearful appearance she became the mother who would rage and fight against these oppressors. This was an important rhetoric in nation building and in later years served as a premise for a gendered national politics.

Kalyani Devaki Menon in her book, 'Everyday Nationalism : Women of the Hindu Right in India' focused how these right wing cadres use the convenient nationalistic imagery, narratives, history and make their voices of violence appealing to the masses. They mold the everyday women and feed their own communal agenda in the garb of nationalistic ideals. Nira Yuval Davis in 'Gender and Nation' reflects that it is the "women who reproduce nations biologically, culturally and symbolically". These political priestesses focus on the revival of the fierce Hindu ideology in order to form a Hindu Rashtra. The entire idea of Hindutva stands on the pillar of Patriarchy. Women are the bearers of Hindu Rashtra. The women are often projected as goddess figures to enter into the remotest corner of domesticity. They believe that it is through these female figures, the future of the nation would find momentum. For example, The Durga Bahini, an organisation of women have named themselves as the primordial Hindu Goddess to shroud their often violent activities as a form of fierce protectiveness. They think of themselves as the driving force of a 'New found Nation' and propagates the age old tradition of the Mother Goddess killing the evil. During Hindutva force inflicted riots like in the case of Babri Masjid, these women have termed all forms of communal riots and casualties as a selfless deed for one's nation. The people associated with such violence were also treated by them as "heroes" who have exercised their agency to protect their Mother Land. However even though these female organizations use the narratives of collective victimhood, they are often seen

propagating violence on minority women. During the Shaheenbagh demonstration, several women engaged themselves in peaceful agitation to protest against the outrageous Citizenship Act. However in numerous occasions these women were subjected to both verbal and physical abuse where their tents and belongings were destroyed.

During the eve of Partition, the battles of land, home, honor and religion played themselves on a women's body. Most of the conflicts were resolved on or inside the female body, the body which at per convenience became the embodiment or a mother. Onset of the Partition, millions of women were abducted, raped and ultimately murder to inflict revenge. Their agencies stripped off. This form of honor is closely related to the idea of the Virgin Land. During the era of Partition several women handed over weapons to the men so that they can save the nation. These handing over of weapons to protect the nation are still at large used as a trope to disintegrate the idea of one land.

II. Conclusion

In Rabindranath Tagore's novel, 'Ela'r Chaar Adhyay', a young girl named Ela found herself in the midst of freedom struggle. She was a reflection of militant women who sacrificed her entire life and love to help her nation in need. But never did Tagore portray her as a Goddess. She was an "ordinary" woman who performed some extraordinary deeds.

"Nohi Debi, Nohi Samanya Nari"

(I'm not a Goddess nor am I an ordinary woman).

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