

The Nation and its Women: Representation of Women in Bangla Plays of the Partition Era

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Abstract

The Partition of Bengal in 1905 sowed the seeds of anti-colonial nationalism in India. The ensuing anti-Partition movement went on to become the precursor of the Indian National Movement. The movement, as a result, established the codes on which the creation of the 'imagined political community' was attempted. Nevertheless, this process of 'making of the nation' by the anti-Partition nationalist movement faced resistance from sections of the Bengali society. Bangla literature also responded to the conflict visible in the political world as it depicted multilayered response to the Partition, the anti-Partition movement and the model of Indian nationalism posited by the varied sections. This paper attempts to trace and thereby understand the varied responses to the anti-Partition movement through the depiction of women in the Bangla historical plays written during the Partition era(1905-1911).

Keywords: *Nation, Gender, Bengal, Anti-colonial, Partition*

The period between 1905 (the year of the declaration of the Bengal division of the Presidency of Fort William) and 1911 (the year of its annulment) stands out as not only one of the most significant phases in the history of Bengal but of the Indian subcontinent. The decision of the colonial government to divide the Bengal Province on September 1, 1905 (annulled in 1911) directly impacted the socio-political history of the Indian subcontinent. On the one hand, it gave a boost to the Indian National Movement by causing a surge of anti-colonial sentiments and on the other hand, it irreparably fragmented Indian society along communal lines, resulting in the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

Theories on the concepts of 'nation' and 'nationalism' posit the importance of the national movements in the forging of nations. Hobsbawm (1992) states that nations are conceived by “governments and the spokesmen and activities of nationalists (or non-nationalists) movements” (p. 11). They are also popular constructs as conceived by “the ordinary persons who are the objects of their (government's and nationalist's) actions and propaganda” (p. 11). The Partition period saw the emergence of varied responses to the Partition. While anti-colonial sentiments gave birth to the Swadeshi and Boycott Movement, political movements in support of the Partition were also established during this period. Another response, anti-colonial/Partition but simultaneously anti-Swadeshi in nature was also recorded in this period. These varied ideological movements attempted to conceive, according to Anderson (1991) “imagined political communities” (p. 6) on the political sphere as well as create a mass-appeal towards their principles. Bangla literature played a vital role in popularising the principles of these ideological/political movements. This paper is a study of depiction of women in Bangla historical plays of this period through which it attempts to identify the concept of the 'imagined community' conceived by these movements¹.

The social, political and historical plays of that time became a medium through which the ideologies of the various movements were spread amongst the masses. Pratapaditya of Jessore, Sirajuddaulah and Mir Kasim of Murshidabad were brought back to the memory of the Bengalis by these playwrights and made into icons through which the ideologies were propagated. However, a lack of legendary heroes from Bengal made writers borrow non-Bengali icons. Maratha hero Shivaji,² (Girishchandra Ghosh's *Chatrapati Shivaji* 1907), the Rajput warrior Rana Pratap Singh (D.L. Ray's *Rana Pratap Singha*, 1905) among many others were made heroes of Bengali plays.

The anti-Partition agitation, popularly known as the Swadeshi and Boycott Movement was initiated with “the purpose of annulling the partition of Bengal,” (Chopra et al., 2005, p. 196). It harbingered anti-colonial sentiments and became the precursor to the Indian National Movement. The Swadeshi Movement also attempted to forge a nation by dictating the codes it was to be based on through its political, economic and ethno-cultural programmes. Swadeshi playwrights like Girishchandra Ghosh wrote several plays like *Sirajuddaullah* (1905) and *Mirkasim* (1906) with the intention of making them

the icons of Swadeshi nationalism.

Girishchandra's *Chatrapati Shivaji* traces the Maratha hero's chivalrous fight against oppressive powers to liberate the masses. The play begins with Shivaji's victory against the Muslim invaders of Poona and goes on to focus on his clash with the exploitative and cruel Mughal ruler Aurangzeb. Aurangzeb's cunning is no match to Shivaji's grit and intelligence as Shivaji succeeds in his mission of establishing the ideal state under his rule where all religions and communities live in harmony. Shivaji says "My subjects are like my children, there is no question of Hindu or Muslim" (Ghosh, 1999, p. 422). If Shivaji along with his ministers Tanaji and Moropant, his Brahmin teachers Dadaji Kondadev and Gangaji and his son, Sambhaji fight against oppression directly; the Maratha women like Shivaji's mother Jijabai, his wives Saibai and Putlabai and Tanaji's wife Lakshmibai act as the source of inspiration for the men who are fighting to safeguard the nation from oppressive forces. Hence, these women characters, in the words of Partha Chatterji (1999), are depicted as the protectors of the spiritual and cultural domain of the nation, that is, the *ghar*. Their duty is to strengthen the inner core of the nation by inculcating within women and children the values of nationalism, while the men fight against the colonisers and oppressors in the material domain of the '*bahir*'.

Jijabai is Shivaji's guide as she instructs him to fight against the oppressive Muslims. When she hears about the capture of Poona by the Mughals, she instigates her son to fight for its freedom and protect its cultural purity:

Shibba, I heard that Poona is in the hands of the enemies; why are you here? The room where you played as a child, is now a place of entertainment of a *nautch* girl of another religion; the room where I prayed to Bhabani by blowing the conch, is now echoing with the shouts of the Mughals; the place where hundreds of Brahmins have been fed, the Muslims now eat cow-meat; the premises which would be filled with the aroma of milk-curd-*kheer*, could now be smelling of cow-meat. Shibba, why are you here in this situation? Why is the enemy still not intimidated by your lion-like roar, why is your sword not stained with the blood of the enemy? (Ghosh, 1999, p. 371)

Shivaji's two wives are also his pillars of strength. The relationship among the three is an exemplification of the mutual sharing of responsibilities. Whenever Shivaji begins a mission, they not only pray for his victory but also seek strength

for themselves so that they can carry out their duties as women of the nation. When Shivaji is about to leave for Delhi on Aurangzeb's invitation, his wives and mother pray to Goddess Bhabani, the chief deity of the royal family. Saibai says:

O Mother Goddess! Motherland! Please bless us. O Mother, I am letting my son and husband go under the inauspicious constellation – O Motherland, please bless us. Mother grant us with a heart full of reverence – O Mother may the sense of duty increase within the hearts of the women of India. May the women of India give birth to brave children! May death be more necessary than submission for the women of India – may they be capable of feeding their children with a sense of nationalism along with their milk – may they be capable of teaching their children to be determined – may dutifulness be the sole knowledge of India – may the teachings of women of India bring back India's golden era. My Lord! My heart is filled with peace, you may leave to pursue your duties. (Ghosh, 1999, p. 390)

Such division of labour during a nationalist struggle may have attempted to as sertequality between men and women citizens of the nation but its illusory nature issimultaneously exposed. During Shivaji's war against the Mughals, Saibai acknowledges the lack of physical strength in women, the *grihalakshmis*. She says that “We are women. Our weak muscles are incapable of resisting the enemies, we are even incapable of self-defence, but we can protect our most precious treasure, our purity” (Ghosh, p. 378). A martial image of a woman is conceived or is conceivable in the form of Goddess Bhabani, who according to the nationalist iconography is the masculine-feminine, dwelling at the threshold of the domestic sphere and not inside it. Bhabani is not completely feminine because she has physical power to slay demons, an attribute of the men. Although Lakshmibai is described as “the lioness” (Ghosh, p. 410), her chivalry is limited to maternal activities which she takes up only after her husband instructs her to do so:

If you see a famished person in Maharashtra, offer your food to him. If you see an orphaned child in Maharashtra, take care of him like your own son, teach your friends to inspire their husbands to walk on the path of nationalism. (Ghosh, 1999, p. 358).

Her responsibilities, like the other women continue to be confined to the *ghar* as

she is not given a say in the political matters of the nation. Such portrayals give the nation a gendered image. Simultaneously, some of the other characteristics of the nation imagined by the Swadeshi nationalists are revealed through these women characters. Reverence to the Hindu deity as the protector of the Maratha kingdom of Shivaji, the prototype of the ideal nation of the Swadeshi, asserts the Hindu predominance in the nation. Moreover, the presence of mainly upper class/caste women as the valiant nurturers of the nation and the ideal compatriots of the chivalrous upper class/caste Marathas make the imagined nation as upper class/caste dominated. However, the nature of the nation does not exclude other religious/class/caste communities from its ambit as is seen in the vision of his ideal state by Shivaji discussed earlier³.

The dominance of the upper class/caste Hindu ideologies in the Swadeshi Movement led to the emergence of counter-movements/ideologies. The lower class/castes distanced themselves from the Swadeshi Movement, and a section of the Muslim community established the Muslim League in 1907. These ideological conflicts resulted in a series of riots in 1907 and 1908 leading to the disillusionment of a section of the Bengali intellectuals about the ideal of nationalism, the most prominent of them being Rabindranath Tagore. D.L. Ray followed Tagore and both these playwrights preached their counter-Swadeshi ideology through their historical plays.

D.L. Ray's *Mevar Patan* (Fall of Mevar, 1908) is another historical play with protagonists of non-Bengali origin. This play is set in Chittorgarh during the reign of Rana Amarsingh of Mevar, a descendant of the great warrior-king Maharana Pratap Singh. After remaining independent for almost seventy-five years, the kingdom is again under the threat of a Mughal invasion. It is in this backdrop that the characters portray the problems of nationalism and its alternative are proposed through the characters of Manasi, the princess of Mevar, Satyawati, a mendicant poet and the daughter of king of Agra and Kalyani, the wife of Mahabat Khan.

The rhetoric of women as the guardian of the cultural entity of the nation used by the nationalists is visible in Ray's *Mevar Patan* as well. Satyawati, a nationalist, becomes the epitome of the protector of the spiritual domain of the nation. She exemplifies the ideals of national pride. She takes up the role of spreading nationalist consciousness amongst the people of Mevar and thereby helps in strengthening its spiritual core. The princess-mendicant sings about

the national icons like Pratap Singh and Ranjit Singh. When the final battle between Mahabat Khan's army and Mevar begins, she and her son Arun, go to the countryside to inspire the people of Mevar to join the war. Satyawati, Lakshmibai in Ghosh's play, is the 'lioness' of the *ghar* and serves the cause of nationalism. Yet, her sacrifice does not reach a glorified end as the final battle is described as apocalyptic. It leaves the Mevar side devoid of chivalrous heroes.

Kalyani, also portrays the flip-side of nationalism. She depicts the real status of the women of the nation – the silenced/marginalised half. She does not protest when her husband, Mahabat Khan, the prince of Agra, joined the Mughal army and converted to Islam, nor does she voice a word of protest when her son is killed by Mahabat Khan's army. She becomes the victim of the egoistical battle of national pride being fought in the political world of the *bahir*. Kalyani and Satyawati portray the ideals of nationalism as restricting rather than liberating leading only to annihilation of the ideals of humanism.

Manasi, the princess of Mevar, like Satyawati, wanders on the roads of Mevar and helps the needy nation. However, contrary to the character of Satyawati, Manasi is against ideals of nationalism. The militant nature of the nationalist consciousness of the people of Mevar makes her take the path of pacifism and she is more interested in the ideals of universalism. She is anguished to see the unreasonable loss of innocent lives, “O, bloodshed all around! These groans! – What a pity sight! O Lord! In your kingdom by what law does a human being eat another?” (p. 19). When a beggar woman praises her, she says “the beggar woman's cry of 'Hail Mother!' sounds so sweet. It's stronger than the shouts of victory, it is purer than mother's love, and it's sweeter than the first lisping words of a child” (p. 12). She valorises charity and humanitarianism instead of victory in battle fields. In her interpretation of the clarion call of 'Hail Mother!' the ideologies of humanism and love become significant and replace the violence associated with nationalism.

Rather than women being the silenced 'nurturers' in the nation, Manasi's universalism makes her the 'nurturer,' as she visits the site where Mevar is fighting against the Mughals and nurses the injured. She says: “I will do my duty, I can't help those who die in the war. But I will nurse those who will be injured” (p. 18). Manasi spreads the ideals of universal love and humanitarianism rather than nationalism as she nurses the injured Mughal and Mevar soldiers side by side. She is liberated of the narrow-minded idealism of

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nationalism.

Manasi's character finds resonance in the character of Surama in Tagore's historical play *Prayaschitta* (Expiation). Written in 1909, this play is based on the historical character of King Pratapaditya of Jessore, who in several pro-Swadeshi works was declared the icon of nationalism. Tagore's portrayal of Pratapaditya is that of a ruthless and unscrupulous authoritarian. Not only are the people of Madhavpur, a small hamlet in Jessore, a victim of his torture, but his old uncle, Basanta Ray, his son Udayaditya, daughter-in-law, Surama, and his daughter Vibha also bear the brunt of his vengeance. An ascetic Dhananjay Bairagi and Surama end up as the heroes of the play who rescue the masses from the atrocities of the dictator.

The women in *Prayaschitta* are the victims of the vengeance and violence played out in the battle for national pride in the '*bahir*.' Political tensions in the material world affect the women who are confined within the 'home.' The narrow egotism of racial pride seeps feelings of jealousy and vengeance within the home. The Queen, as the wife of Pratapaditya and a woman of the nation imagined by him, is a victim of an oppressive husband as well as of the patriarchal domination. She follows the orders of her husband when she asks Surama to leave the palace. Marginalised within her home, she is jealous of Surama who gets the love and support of her husband. Her act of poisoning of Surama at the instruction of her husband exposes the ruthlessness inherent in the ideals of nationalism. Vibha, although portrayed as a strong character, is a victim of the injustices perpetrated on her by her father and husband as the two men are entangled in a clash of ego under the garb of national pride.

Surama's sufferings are also a result of the tense political relations between Pratapaditya and her father, the king of Sripur, as the latter refused to accept the sovereignty of Jessore. Surama assumes the role of the ideal woman who silently tolerates the tortures of her father-in-law but being the *grihalakshmi* – the protector of the *ghar* – safeguards the people of her kingdom from the atrocities of Pratapaditya. However, being a follower of the ideals of humanitarianism, Surama's role is not restricted to the affairs of the *ghar*, she finds a role in the political world of the *bahir*. She resists the oppression perpetrated by the king on his subjects and whosoever is a victim of the king's tyranny. Surama helps Ramchandra Ray, Vibha's husband, escape from

Jessore. She later helps the palace guard, Sitaram and his wife, after the latter helps her to release Vibha's husband, Ramchandra Ray from the prison:

Surama: Did you get the clothes and money I sent to you early in the morning?

Sitaram's wife: I have. But how long will they last, mother? You have ruined us!

Surama: Don't you fear, Kamini! I will provide you food and clothes till the time I have them! Take something with you today as well. Don't stay here for long. (p. 719)

In fact, "Bau Thakurani" in Tagore's novel *Bau Thakuranir Haat* (The Young Queen's Market), which is also the source of this play, is Surama. This was Tagore's way to pay tribute to the courage and sacrifice of Surama. Her character evades the stereotypical nationalist iconography. She is neither the desolate victim of oppression nor is she the all-destroying vengeful one. Her chivalry lies in her spirit to sacrifice for the sake of humanity and in her unfailing courage to resist the ruthless exploitation of the powerful. She, like Dhananjay Bairagi, becomes the apostle of universal love and peace. Bairagi's renunciation of Jessore and Surama's sacrifice are equivalent to penance to create the ideal human society, the *mahajati*⁴. This is the dream for which Manasi in D.L Ray's play also attempts to achieve.

A study of the portrayal of women in Bangla theatre of the Partition era, therefore, reveals the Hindu, upper class/caste nature of Swadeshi nationalism as it attempted to imagine its nation on the basis of these ideologies. Although not exclusive in nature, their model of anti-Partition/colonial nationalism and imagined national community was disowned by non-Hindu, non-upper-class/caste communities, leading to the failure of the Swadeshi Movement in achieving pan-Bengali/Indian support. The alternative anti-Partition/colonial model suggested by Tagore, however, abandons the concept of nationalism and nation and preaches the need to evolve universalism which transcends the restrictive boundaries of nation. The ideal world of Tagore and Ray does provide a greater role for the women in the *bahir*, when compared with the role given to the women of the nation by the Swadeshi nationalists. However, it would be pertinent to state that in the idea of the nation as well as in the concept of the *mahajati*, women and their role is dictated by the patriarchy.

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Endnotes

1. This paper is derived from my Ph D thesis on “The First Partition of Bengal and the Problematic of Indian Nationalism: A Study of Select Bangla Writings (1905-1916)” submitted to Dept of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi under the guidance of Prof Nishat Zaidi.
2. The depiction of Shivaji as an idol for the Bengalis fighting for their identity is itself problematic because of the history of the relationship of the Maratha warriors and the people of Bengal region. As is known, many Maratha robbers invaded and plundered Bengal at various points of history. They were known to the people of Bengal as “Borgi”. The famous children's lullaby/chhara also depicts the fear and helplessness of the common man during these Borgi raids.
Sona ghumalo, para juralo
Borgi elo deshe.
Bulbuli te dhan kheyechhe
Khajna debo kishe?
(Little darling is asleep, the neighbourhood is calm
The Borgis have raided to the country.
Bulbul bird has also eaten the grains
How do I pay the taxes?)
Bankimchandra Chatterji's novel *Anandamath* also refers to the Borgi raiders.
3. Refer to Partha Chatterji's *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism*.
4. Refer to Arabinda Poddar's *Tagore: The Political Personality for a discussion on the concept of mahajati*.