

Nationalism and Folklore: Swadeshi Movement and Trivedi's *Bangalakshmir Bratakatha*

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Abstract

The Swadeshi Movement of Bengal (1905-1908) came up to protest against the division of the Presidency of Fort William into two separate provinces. Its leaders attempted to popularise its ideologies amongst the masses by including ethno-cultural motifs. Religious festivals like Durga Puja and Kali Puja were celebrated by the Swadeshi leaders with the motive of spreading anti-colonial sentiments amongst the people and forging a nation. Urban writers experimented with the folk forms to propagate Swadeshi ideologies. Ramendrasundar Trivedi (1864-1919) wrote *Bangalakshmir Bratakatha* (1905) in the *bratakatha* (ritual tales) form and was an allegory of the nation of the Bengalis as visualised by the Swadeshis. Trivedi's aim was to preach the ideals of the Swadeshi movement among the women, the spiritual core of the nation in the making. However, the principles proposed in the *Bratakatha* reflect an image of a nation which is against the idea of pan-Indian nationalism propagated by the Swadeshis. Trivedi, rather, propagates sub-nationalist ideology. Based on the above made observations, the proposed paper aims to study the use of folklore to represent the ideology of the urban/political. The paper also attempts to study the formulation of nationalism/ sub-nationalism in Trivedi's work.

Keywords: Bengal history, Bengali literature, Folklore, Nationalism, Nation, Partition, Swadeshi Movement

The division of the Bengal Division of the Presidency of Fort William in 1905 to create two separate provinces started a period which is of great significance in the history of Indian nationalism. The colonial decision to partition the Bengal

Province on grounds of administrative convenience saw large scale protest from the Bengalis and harbingered anti-colonial sentiments in India. The anti-Partition movement became the precursor of the Indian National Movement as it attempted to reject the Partition and create a united Bengal on the basis of a derivative model of nationalism.

Literature from Bengal took up the cause of creating an 'imagined community' during the Partition era as ethno-cultural motifs were created to signify the making of this community. Literature, through these motifs, also went on to reflect the socio-political situation in Bengal. The reasons behind such phenomena have been obvious. The impact of the 1905 Partition and the consequent anti-Partition movement in Bangla society were deep. Not only was the urban intelligentsia moved by the socio-political situation in Bengal, rural Bengal also felt the tremors of change.

Folklore, as a genre of Bangla literature also reflected this upheaval in Bengal. While rural Bengal continued to enrich folklore, urban-elites of Bengal gradually became aware of the richness of folklore as the bourgeoisie continued with their project of bringing the indigenous literary culture of Bengal to the forefront through print culture. The urban intelligentsia, comprising the urban elite and the middle class, developed a keen interest in the study of folklore and took interest in preserving its heritage¹. For the intelligentsia, folklore, gradually, became an apt medium through which they could connect with the masses and preach their nationalist and counter-nationalist ideologies emerging in the wake of the Partition of 1905.

Ramendrasunder Trivedi's (1864-1919) *Bangalakshmir Bratakatha* (1905) was one such work which uses the folk form to depict the political process of the 'making' of the nation. The present paper aims to study the use of folklore to represent the ideology of the urban/political through Trivedi's work. The paper also attempts to study the formulation of nationalism/ sub-nationalism in Trivedi's work.

Trivedi wrote the *Bratakatha*, a spiritual form popular amongst Hindu women, to promote the idea of sacrifice for the sake of the nation amongst women. The publication of *Bangalakshmir Bratakatha* coincided with the declaration of the 'Chiraashauch' (Never ending mourning)², the 'Arandhan Brata' (No-Cooking Pledge), and the *Rakhibandhan* festival commemorated by the nationalists. Barid Baran Ghosh reports that on the 16 October 1905, the day Bengal Partition was to be implemented, Ramendrasundar Trivedi's mother,

Chandrakamini Devi, collected about five hundred women in their village home in Murshidabad district and started the *Arandhan Brata*. It was at this congregation that Trivedi's daughter Girijadevi read out *Bangalakshmir Bratakatha*.

Published in 1905 (*Pausha*, 1312), in *Bangadashan (Naba Parjay)*, Trivedi brings together the two spheres of the '*ghar*' and the '*bahir*' through the concepts of *grihalakshmi*, the goddess of the household, and *bangalakshmi*, the goddess of Bengal. It sends the message that the nurturer and the preserver of the culture of the nation – the ideal wife and the nation's women, who are imagined as *grihalakshmi* – sacrifice for the sake of the motherland – *bangalakshmi* – in order to propagate the spirit of nationalism and strengthen the nationalist movement being fought in the male dominated public sphere.

An allegory of Bengal, the *Bratakatha* begins with the assertion that Bengal was a unified whole since the times when the Hindus ruled over it. It was during this time that the peace-loving goddess – *Bangalakshmi* – had settled in Bengal. Her advent to the mortal world of Bengal is described using allusions of beauty, peace and prosperity, “The nation was now filled with flowers and fruits. The lakes were filled with lotus. White geese swam on them. Men had their granaries full, their sheds filled with cows and faces filled with happiness. Human beings were extremely happy and prosperous” (p. 388).

The Muslim invasion of Bengal leads to unrest in the region. The author writes, “The religion of the Hindus was defiled. The Muslims broke temples and built their Masjids on them. Half of the Hindus were converted into Islam. Hindus and Muslims, living in the same village, fought against each other” (p. 389). Communal tensions force the Goddess of Bengal to appear in front of the Pathan king of Gaur. The Pathan king, Hossainshah, pleads her not to leave Bengal. Hossainshah says: “I will look at the Hindu and Muslims as equals . . .” (p. 389). *Bangalakshmi* agrees to stay in Bengal and predicts a harmonious future for the region under the Mughal rulers. She says: “Delhi will have a Mughal king. The King of Delhi will become the *Badshah* of Bengal. The king will not differentiate between the Hindus and Muslims. Hindus and Muslims will become brothers and all conflicts will be resolved” (p. 389).

The Goddess' blessing is fulfilled in the due course of time and Bengal continues on its path of prosperity. But peace is short-lived once again. The Christians from a distant country arrive in India as merchants during this period. Gradually, they become the rulers of Bengal. This is the beginning of the

colonial period in Bengal. The author tactfully brings in his *Swadeshi* ideology here and shows how the British slowly drained the nation off its treasures, “The merchant king brought glass. The people of Bengal bought this glass and gave their precious stones in exchange. Indigenous goods are no longer a fetish for the people. Charmed by the hues of the false stones, they ignored the real gems of their land” (p. 389).

Following their economic control of Bengal, the British decide to divide the Hindus and the Muslims. It is at this stage that *Bangalakshmi* decides to leave Bengal forever. It is at this stage that thousands of Bengalis crowd the Kalighat temple and plead to the Goddess to stop *Bangalakshmi* from leaving Bengal. They take the *Swadeshi* pledge that they will never touch foreign-made goods. Hence, on the 30th day of *Ashwin*, the day when *Bangalakshmi* was supposed to leave Bengal, she decided to settle there permanently.

As in the case of the traditional *bratakatha*, Trivedi's *bratakatha* also preaches about the proper protocol of commemorating the ritual to pray to *Bangalakshmi*. The “Programme” says,

Every year in the month of *Ashwin*³, on the day of the Partition, the women of Bengal will keep the fast for *Bangalakshmi*. No one will cook that day. Apart from serving the Gods, the ill and the children, no housewife will light the kitchen fire. Fruits, puffed rice, or rice cooked on the previous day has to be had for the entire day.

Women will set up the sacred pot⁴. Widows will wear sandal wood paste markings on their forehead, while the married ladies will put vermilion. They will listen to the *katha* with *Haritaki* or Beetel nut in their hands. After the *katha*, devotees will pray to the *pot* and blow the conch shell. After this, devotees will tie *Swadeshi* cotton or silk threads dipped in turmeric on the left wrists of the women and on the right wrists of the men. Conches will be blown to celebrate *Rakhi*. Jaggery will be distributed amongst the devotees. Everybody will then drown foreign-made clothes and articles, as per their capabilities in the water. Everyday all devotees will put a part of the day's earning in the *pot* which at an appropriate time or at the end of the year will be donated for the cause of the Mother. (p. 391)

The *Bratakatha* idealises the attitude expected from the women at a time when the men were engaged in an anti-colonial nationalist movement and thereby creates a 'gendered' nation. Trivedi's concern for the Indian nation and his

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desire to establish a strong pan-Indian anti-colonial nationalist movement is re-iterated by Dipika Majumdar:

To Trivedi, one of the intriguing political questions was why it had been so easy for the British to establish their political domination in India . . . While searching Indian history with this purpose in view Trivedi noticed no change in the attitude of the people of India, in the 13th century when Muslim rule was established in India and in the 19th century when British domination became firmly rooted in India. In both the instances Indians accepted foreign rule without protest and without any concern. (p. 106)

The *Bratakatha* also testifies to it. As in the case of the Muslim invasion, one finds references to violence perpetrated on the Hindus but no instances of protests. Similarly, in the context of British colonisation of India, it is stated that the British did so by duping the Indians. Nevertheless, the anti-colonial movement, according to Trivedi's vision could not be devoid of the Hindu element, dominated by the Hindu culture but inclusive of all religious communities. Majumdar states that Trivedi "finds the presence of the Hindu society but no Hindu nationhood in India" (p. 112). Further, in the essay "*Samajik Byadhi O tahar Pratikar*" (The Disease in the society and its Solution) he states that "No nation would be created without the unity between the Hindus and the Muslims." (as cited in Majumdar, p. 495)

It was for this reason that Trivedi tries to neutralize the Hindu association of mother nation *Bangalakshmi* and give it a secular image. However, Trivedi also could not save himself from falling into the trap, like the other *Swadeshi* writers, as he also unintentionally projects his imagined nation as a Hindu one. For instance, the atrocities on the Hindus which occur in the wake of the Muslim invasion in Bengal, do disturb the mother goddess, she notices the decrease in the number of Hindus due to conversions⁵, yet is pleased when the Pathan king promises that he will take care of the welfare of the Muslims as well as the Hindus. She blesses the nation with a future where Hindus and Muslims live like brothers. Even when the British decided to Partition Bengal, she says that "She is neither Hindu, nor Muslim" (p. 390). However, the later allusion to Goddess Kali of the Kalighat Temple re-asserts the Hinduised image of the *Swadeshi* Movement. Also the entire programme along with Trivedi's choice of the *bratakatha* further underlines the predominantly Hindu image of the nation.

Moreover, apart from the Hinduised image, *Bangalakshmir Bratakatha*, also seems to be biased in favour of the upper caste. A man of science, Trivedi expressed support for the Hindu *varna* system but criticized the irrationality and rigidity with which it was followed. In order to remove the false beliefs within the society about various Hindu rituals and the related discrimination of the *Sudras*, Trivedi pointed out that “it is not written in any scripture that without a *Brahmin* priest a *Sudra* cannot perform his religious rites” (Majumdar, p. 74).

However, Trivedi's allusion to only the upper castes in the *Bratakatha* reveals the other side of his views. The story informs that in order to reinstate goodness in Bengal, the Hindu king Adishur had to bring Brahmins and Kayasth as from outside Bengal, as the Bengali Brahmins had wavered from their moral ethics. Therefore, before the advent of the Muslims in Bengal, the king, who represents the Kshatriya caste, the Brahmins and the Kayasthas had the responsibility of restoring the decorum of Bengal and pleasing the Goddess. The lower castes are ignored in this allegory except for a reference to the conversions of the Hindus to Islam. Trivedi, therefore, revives the traditional caste-bias as he bestows power to the upper castes in the Hindu society to cleanse the society⁶. Such an attitude could only give rise to Hindu chauvinism and not a form of secular pan-Bengali nationalism.

Trivedi's narration of the allegory of Bengal establishes the region as a sub-national entity which tends to re-establish the socio-cultural pre-colonial past within its boundaries. The community imagined in his allegory is no different from the one conceptualized by the other *Swadeshi* nationalists⁷. Moreover, Trivedi's narrative of Bengal as a sub-national entity testifies the dominance of Bengal in the Indian political sphere during the anti-Partition agitation, while remaining within the boundaries of the Indian nation.

Bangalakshmir Bratakatha, hence, illustrates the ideologies of the bourgeoisie through the form of the folk. It exhibits Trivedi's concept of nation and nationalism drawn from the West and his typically Indian beliefs about the sanctity of *Vedic* religion and social system came into direct conflict with each other. The traditional format of his composition and the westernized concept of nationalism came in conflict with each other thereby leading to the tight compartmentalization of the gender roles in the society. The conflict between tradition and modernity was further manifest in the dichotomy of the nationalist iconography of the woman. The image of the woman as the ideal

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domestic wife was in conflict with her role as the reflection of the motherland and the Mother Goddess. Therefore, through the analysis of Trivedi's work one finds that *Bangalakshmir Bratakatha* failed to project a pan-Indian nationalist movement as the nation it imagined was predominantly Hindu, upper-caste dominated and 'gendered' in nature with the interests of Bengal being more predominant. The interests of the Hindu bourgeoisie Bengalis often came in conflict with the national interests, leading to the failure of the anti-colonial nationalism to garner a pan-Indian status.

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Endnotes

1. Jawaharlal Handoo in his book *Folklore: An Introduction*, divides folklore studies into three phases – Missionary, Nationalistic and Academic. The Missionary phase in India can be traced back to 1874 when the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* and the *Indian Antiquary* were first published. While the Academic phase began in post-Independence India, the Nationalistic phase of folklore studies began in the first decade of the twentieth century, with rise of the nationalist fervor amongst the masses. Folklore studies came out of the domain of the missionaries. Folklore was now studied from the Indian point-of-view. It not only aimed to study or carry folklore which had nationalistic themes but also aimed to make the urban-based traditional intelligentsia aware of the richness of folk culture.
2. On 20 July 1905, Sanjivani, a Bangla periodical declared that "If Bengal is divided, then it will be an everlasting mourning (Chiraashauch) for the Bengalis. Until Bengal is not reinstated in its old position, we will continue to mourn this loss." Reference to the 'Arandhan Brata' is made in the play, *Banger Angachched*. These fasts along with the Rakhibandhan festival were commemorated in order to protest the Partition.
3. 16 October 1905, the day when the Partition was executed.
4. A pot decorated with sacred symbols on the surface, filled with holy water from the ponds or rivers and covered with Mango leaves and green coconut in all Hindu ceremonies. It is considered auspicious.
5. Trivedi tactfully avoids mentioning about forced conversions which would have drawn bitter comments for the Muslims. He also deters from referring to deliberate conversions by the lower castes as it would have angered the upper caste Hindus.
6. Tagore in *Ghare-Baire* and *Gora* preaches against such upper caste Hindu chauvinism which

was visibly on the rise during the Swadeshi era. Refer to the previous chapter for a detailed discussion.

7. Refer to Partha Chatterjee's comments in his book *Present History of Bengal* on this issue.

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