

Nation and Nationalism: Feminization of the Nation and its Evolutionary Transcendence in Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*

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Abstract:

National movements aim to achieve a geographically and politically identifiable construct primarily based on the otherness of the colonized selves involved in comparison to the colonizers. The masculine nature of any freedom struggle is imperative given the patriarchal nature of society at large. The proposed article would try to assimilate and analyze the growth of the concept of nation, the nationalist movement in India and the rise of Bharat Mata as the symbol of nationalism to the transcendence of the same in the figure of Savitri in Sri Aurobindo's magnum opus: Savitri.

Keywords: *Nationalism, Masculinity, Femininity, Motherland, Evolution*

Nation, according to Max Weber is 'a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state' along with notions of common descent, though not necessarily common blood (Gerth and Mills 172-79). Layoun asserts that nationalism constructs and proffers a narrative of the 'nation' and of its relation to an already existing or potential state. (410-11) Nationalism is both, a goal– to achieve statehood, and a belief – in unique collective consciousness. Nationalists envisage to achieve both statehood and nationhood.

The nation is an invented tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1) which is a summation of 'imagining' a national past and present (Anderson 6-7). According to Gellner, it is nationalism that engenders nations, and not the other way around (49). Benedict Anderson's conceptualization of a nation or nation-space as an imagined community in a way tries to rationalize the individual's relationship with the nation in the domain of knowledge and cognition (6-7), but is unable to situate passionate self sacrifices for the nation (Smith 10-28), which is akin to Nirad C. Chaudhuri's description in his autobiography:

An eagerness to serve and sacrifice ourselves was the third element in our patriotic emotion. Hence forward, we thought, we had no right to live any other life but a dedicated life. Our country was waiting for us to rescue and redeem her. (1969: 210-211)

Nationalist struggles tried to create or discover a national identity which was often inspired by a rediscovery of ancient custom and literature, resurgence of a suppressed language and an attempt to re-invoke the importance of ethnicity and religion. Nationalism and national identities in India started forming its roots from the 18th century onwards and the process was catalyzed by the revolt of native states, landlords, and disgruntled British Indian soldiers against the colonial rule from 1857 to 1868.

The nationalist movement for independence later emerged as the process of mobilization of the regional and community identities which were historically gendered symbols and identities.

The concept of a single-powerful nation state promoted masculine ideology for its own sustenance irrespective of its origin in modernism, unlike colonialism, anti-colonialism and nationalism, masculinity remained a transparent, inadequately theorized construct.

Masculinity acted as the hegemonic supremacy-oriented ideology of British imperialism in India. An elite 'White' masculinity presided above both the loyal but simple, martial or manly races and clever but treacherous, feminized or effeminate native men. According to Krishnaswamy, the idea of masculinity in a way legitimized the imperial rule by equating an aggressive, muscular, chivalric model of manliness with racial, national, cultural and moral superiority (15). Colonial masculinity was a cultural and epistemological project of colonial domination

The psychology of colonialism shows a language of homology between the sexual and the political in colonial culture. The British imperial ideology in India was hyper-masculine through maintaining a rigid dichotomy between the masculine and the feminine that was part of the gender ideologies of the post-Enlightenment West. The ideals of Victorian manliness, athleticism and militarism featured centrally in studies of British and Anglo-Indian society, especially in accounts of the colonial Indian bureaucracy and the Indian army (Sinha08-11).

The British defined their actions of intrusion into Indian private life as clear, precise, instrumentalist, technical, scientific true and above all beneficial to all who came into contact with it. Pre-colonial Indian societies worked with flexible identities in which 'softer' forms of creativity and intuition were not identified with femininity nor values of violence and power with masculinity. These fluid and permeable identities were undermined by the British rule and the Victorian colonial culture with its rigid and dichotomous ideologies of gender was enforced. Thus, an analogy between political and sexual dominance of the British as evident in the manliness, rationality, courage and control of the British rulers was that juxtaposed against degenerated, effeminate and superstitious subjects.

Nationalism was a conglomeration of 'manly virtues', described by Mosse (1996) as 'normative masculinity', which included willpower, honour, courage, discipline, competitiveness, quiet strength, stoicism, sang-froid, persistence, adventurousness, independence, sexual virility tempered with restraint, and dignity, and which tried to establish the ideals as liberty, equality, and fraternity (Bederman7). The process, of setting boundaries and of articulating national character, creating national history, and chalking out a plan of the nation-state for future tend to emphasize both unity and 'otherness'. The creation of national identity and cultural boundaries tends to engender nationalist ethnocentrism.

The nationalist leaders were in a dilemma as they had to find methods of negotiating the traditional past they had inherited and the sense of modernity they received from the colonial education system. The issue of creating a national identity where India could be represented as a single cultural and political entity became their prime concern.

The figure of the woman was important in the construction of identities as a distinguishing element between the nationalists and colonizers. Nationalism redirects men's passions to a higher purpose and projects a stereotype of human beauty which transcends sensuousness. Manliness comes to mean freedom from sexual passion, the sublimation of sensuality into the leadership of society as the nation. (Mosse 13)

During the early period of nationalism there was no indigenous idea about masculinity but the Victorian conservationist notions that tried to appropriate colonial gender norms like self-discipline and militarization. The immediate influence of Western masculinity in India was the reordering and revival of traditional conceptions of masculinity. Hence, three streams of masculinity emerged in the colonial period: firstly, brahmanic masculinity which tried to propose hard asceticism, renunciation

and sublimation, secondly, *kshatriya* masculinity, which emphasized a hard aggression, pleasure and good living and thirdly, androgyny, particularly for men, that evolved out of Indian tradition and was held up as a spiritual ideal (Krishnaswamy 42).

Partha Chatterjee argues in the same line that now the distinction between the home and the world (*Ghar* and *bahir*) was appropriated in Indian Nationalist discourses to form a new patriarchy in which men must continually compromise with Western ways in the world and women become the guardians of Indian spiritual values at home (1989).

Partha Chatterjee's article on the question of women during the nationalist movement is relevant in this regard. He writes on the subtle strategies of Indian patriarchy:

..... the adulation of woman as goddess or as mother. It served to emphasize with all the force of mythological inspiration what had in any case become a dominant characteristic of femininity in the new construct of woman standing as a sign for nation, namely the spiritual qualities of self sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity and so on. This spirituality did not, as we have seen, impede the chances of the woman, moving out of the physical confines of the home; on the contrary it facilitated it, making it possible for her to go into the world under conditions that would not threaten her femininity. (1999:256-57)

Thus the idea of Deshmata (Motherland) was engendered and a clarion call was given by the nationalists to free 'Mother India' from the shackles of foreign rule. It is interesting to note that the figure of 'Bharat Mata' was first perceived as an image by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in *Ananda Math* (1882) and pictorially created by Abanindranath Tagore in 1905. Abanindranath portrayed as a four-armed Hindu goddess wearing saffron-colored robes, holding the sheaves of rice, a white cloth, manuscripts, a mala, thereby signifying food, clothing, secular learning and spiritual knowledge (Sinha3). The image of was an icon to create nationalist feeling in Indians during the freedom struggle. Sister Nivedita, an admirer of the painting, opined that the picture was refined and imaginative, with standing on green earth and blue sky behind her; feet with four lotuses, four arms meaning divine power; white halo and sincere eyes; and gifts Shiksha-Diksha-Anna-Bastra of the motherland to her children (Rama swamy15). Henceforth, the idea of India was sacralized and feminized.

Sri Aurobindo is an interesting figure in the re-structuring of the concept when he proposed the worship of Bharat Mata as the re-invigorated form of Adishakti:

"For what is a nation? What is our mother-country? It is not a piece of earth, nor a figure of speech, nor a fiction of the mind. It is a mighty Shakti, composed of the Shaktis of all the millions of units that make up the nation, just as Bhawani Mahisha Mardini sprang into being from the Shaktis of all the millions of gods assembled in one mass of force and welded into unity.")

Sri Aurobindo's concept of freedom was a conglomeration of the ideals of a revolutionary political leader in the initial phase and of the poet and the mystic in the later phase. Freedom was not merely geographical and historical achievement but a natural urge towards unity through evolution, transcendence of the self and the whole aspiring beyond the limits of commonality, an inherent aspect of human existence.

In his magnum opus: *Savitri*, he renders his idea of freedom and helps to transcend the figure of , from being the deity of the freedom fighters to the spirit of evolution: Savitri, who aims at universal upliftment and evolution of mankind for a better tomorrow.

The legend of Savitri and Satyavan is a symbolic representation of human development and evolution in Sri Aurobindo's magnum opus: *Savitri*. In *Savitri*, King Aswapathy seeks the absolution of all existential problematic of humanity by achieving the goal of transcendent evolution that triumphs over death. Sri Aurobindo through the character of Aswapathy attempts to bring the esoteric goal of Hindu life to a more-grounded and realistic scenario. Aswapathy envisages to achieve the appeasement of the Divine Mother, to bring onto earth the human being who would "break the iron Law, Change Nature's doom by the lone Spirit's power." Savitri is the solution given to Aswapathy by the Divine Mother.

The philosophical debate in *Savitri* between Yama, the God of Death and Savitri in a way represents the appeasement of the national identity by the colonizers as a potent tool to disorient the independence movement. The God of Death much like the hegemonic colonizer uses various ruses and arguments to convince Savitri, the alternative identity of Mother India, that she does not need independence and suzerainty. Yama represents the fragility of the emotion of love as an akin emotion to freedom which has been misused by humanity and hence needs to be averted. Yama's arguments tend to paint humanity (the colonized race) incapable of handling immortality (freedom). Love, be it of freedom or motherland or an individual, according to Yama, jeopardizes the logic of existence on earth. His satiric tone seems unquestionable as it is placed in the chaotic world the poet initially posits. Savitri, who attempts to reshape the future of the nation, as well as transcend the boundaries of the same and bring freedom to the entire mankind does not accept the present reality but postulates an independent, evolutionary and higher form of life that will change earthly existence forever. The achievement of paradise is not what Savitri envisages for; rather it is the worldly emancipation from the mortality of existence on earth and a permanent relief from the pains of life and death is the definitive finality that she aims at, and here is the evolutionary transcendence of the conceived Bharat Mata of Sri Aurobindo in the Savitri symbol. She transcends the boundaries of state and nation to a larger domain of the dynamic world order then existent as well as the future unseen: "Imperfect is the joy not shared by all", says she (Book 11, Canto 1). She wants humanity to manifest divinity, and evolve into an entity capable of manifesting divinity on earth.

The triumph over colonization would be the proper achievement of the nationalist Sri Aurobindo but he envisages through Savitri to achieve the universal "Life-Divine" with the disappearance of pain, suffering, and associated problems of humanity. The transfiguration of life on earth through spiritual exoneration of mankind from all negative emotions is the goal of "Life Divine" which in the mortal domain seems impossible. Savitri tries to assimilate the duality of the search for knowledge and the human liberation from ignorance. Evolution thus becomes the watchword of Aurobindo. The awakening of the self or raising the life and existence to a higher level of consciousness, the ideal of freedom according to Aurobindo, is achieved through the empowerment of Savitri, the evolved form of Bharat Mata. Aurobindo recognizes woman as the symbol of shakti, the creative power and in this context. Aurobindo seeks to ensure the progress of humanity and fulfillment of its destiny through the achievement of unity, peace and happiness.

The qualities of strong individuality, equality, and the desire for transcendence of the self and society are all found in the epic: *Savitri*. Savitri, as an individual, exhibits growth in consciousness. She rejects the two negations - the ascetic's denial of life and the sensualist's denial of the spirit. Her concern is with the welfare of humanity in general. She sees salvation in depersonalization by uplifting mankind. She is a seeker of truth and knowledge. She successfully actualizes her potential by manifesting her real self through self-upliftment. She symbolizes the evolution of the human love and human soul towards the Ultimate Reality of evolution.

The figure of Savitri thus becomes the evolved form of nationalism which achieves an unification of liberty and transcendence of self and society: 'Krinvanto Vishwam Aryam' (To make the world noble). The nationalist zeal of geographical and political liberation transcends to a world view rarely paralleled.

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