

Kali and the Nation: Sacred Imagery as Political Ideology in Colonial Bengal

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Abstract: *This paper examines the political appropriation of the Hindu goddess Kali during the Swadeshi movement in colonial Bengal. Traditionally portrayed as fierce, chaotic, and transgressive, Kali's image came to symbolize both divine rage and nationalist resistance. Revolutionary figures such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Aurobindo Ghosh reimagined her as the embodiment of a suffering motherland—wounded under British rule yet capable of violent renewal. Her iconography was used not only in literature but also in political discourse and ritual acts meant to inspire collective action. The study also engages with feminist critiques of divine representation, particularly Luce Irigaray's call for a sacred feminine grounded in women's lived experience. In this context, Kali offers an alternative vision, one that refuses domestication and challenges both colonial and patriarchal narratives. Her form disrupts dualistic norms and creates space for new modes of subjectivity, especially for women.*

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Introduction

In the Hindu pantheon of countless gods and goddesses, Kali has been described as the dark goddess, established by powerful male gods to oppose immense powers of evil that threatened to disturb and destabilize the cosmos. According to Hindu ancient texts, at this important point, all

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the gods combined their individual abilities to create the figure of Shakti, one of the most commonly portrayed and recognized Hindu pantheon images.

In the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century, Kali-worship became popular in Bengal. Worship of Kali was especially common among certain social groups, such as militant nationalists, bandits, and forest dwellers, who discovered in the figure and symbolism of Kali a powerful resource to articulate both their downtrodden, poverty-ridden state as well as their political aspirations of empowerment.

How should one interpret the politicization and appropriation of Kali's image and iconography? Is it an expression of our view of evil, divinity, and femininity, as well as their interrelationships? In this paper I will try to address these questions in the context of the Swadeshi period and the usage of Hindu icons and ideologies in extremist politics. In this paper, I will attempt to answer these questions in the context of the Swadeshi period, as well as the utilization Hindu icons and ideology in political extremism.

Femininity and Woman Divinity

Western society and culture are built on a long history of patriarchy, which is supported by an equally long history of dualistic thought in philosophy, theology, and psychology. Other dualistic notions are interpreted in gender specific and unequal ways because of the oppositional categories of male and female. These are then reinforced by the andocentric viewpoint of "man" as the norm of humanness and "woman" as the subordinate "other" who deviates from the norm. The core of monotheistic religious traditions' concept of God as male - but also disembodied and transcendent - is rooted in this history of dualism. Later, it will become clear that the aforementioned gendered and dualistic conceptions are not limited to Western culture and religion. Issues about the inner world and spirit must be addressed if women are to experience themselves as whole in their lived reality. This is a point brought up by Luce Irigaray, a French feminist writer and psychoanalyst. Irigaray insists that women do need divinity in order to become free and autonomous. Women do need an alternative way of relating to what is larger than themselves, for, she believes, "No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been

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established without the help of the divine". However, since the feminine is always defined by lack and exiled from the sacred space of man's construction of a uniquely male god, women need a god of their own - one that will revalorize women's subjectivity, sense of self, language and experience of the body, one that will value mother and daughter, fertility and nature. What is it, Irigaray asks, that holds women back from becoming "divine women"? Her answer suggests that "as long a woman lacks a divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own."¹ Irigaray connects women's corporeal experience to religious and mystic transcendence, but she wants to claim this sacred place for women as a separate, discursive realm. Hindu representational rhetoric is equally masculinist as those of the western monotheistic faiths: Hindu myth symbolizes and sacrileges the feminine. Closer feminist research may reveal that symbols of the divine feminine in Hindu tradition may certainly be appropriated and 'owned' by women - and modified to achieve what Irigaray demands, specifically, an autonomous, holy space and separate, sovereign female Symbolism.

The Representation of Kali

During the mediaeval age of the bhakti movement, theology of Devi as Supreme Being and ultimate reality emerged. The Devi-Mahatmya, a minor treatise written in the sixth century CE, solidified Hinduism's view of the holy feminine. Kali emerges in the Devi-Mahatmya as the personification of Devi's rage and wrath. She also appears in a number of other sacred Puranic myths and Tantric texts. Her entire appearance is continuously terrible and terrifying, particularly in Indian mythology. Kali, for example, has crimson eyes, matted hair, pendulous breasts, an emaciated figure, blood trickling from her lips, human heads around her neck and waist, and dead newborns dangling as earrings from her ears. The "black goddess" Kali emerges from Durga's forehead when she fights the demons to restore cosmic order, overwhelmed by rage. Kali's playground, however, is the battleground between gods and demons, and her energy may often turn irrational and destructive as she rushes into fight, appearing drunk by her adversaries' blood.² Even in her relationship with Shiva, she is frequently depicted as the dominating partner. On Shiva's prone body, she is seen standing or dancing. She is only momentarily humbled in the

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fabled dancing competition when she is said to have been tamed by Shiva. She represents an element in the Hindu pantheon, a power that is disruptive, chaotic, untamed, and uncontrollable. She is a menace to peace and order, and even when she kills and subdues demons and other bad characters on the battlefield, she grows enraged and intoxicated on their blood. She appears to symbolize a component of reality that is borderline and untamable to human control. She is modeled after a mother goddess who resolutely resists domestication.

Along with her centrality in Bengali *Sakta* devotionism, the goddess Kali is also the central figure in Tantra-worship and tantric rites. According to Kinsley, “an underlying assumption in Tantric ideology is that reality is the result and expression of the symbiotic interaction of male and female, Siva and Sakti, the quiescent and the dynamic.” Kali is the goddess who dominates Tantric iconography, texts and rituals, especially in left handed Tantra. All the tantric texts like Yogini-Tantra, the Kamakhya-tantra and the Niruttara-tantra all name her as the greatest manifestation of Mahadevi. She is also called the formless featureless, non-gendered and without attributes - imperishable, approximating to pure being.³

Kali as a Symbol of Cultural Nationalism

The reason the concept of Kali is relevant to the Bengali political mobilization concept is that Kali represents a type of power that was no longer attainable to Bengali males, who were increasingly viewed as fearful and effeminate. Furthermore, Kali takes on new meaning in the Bengali imagination, which is given a political orientation and dimension in the works of Bengali authors such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay.

The iconography and metaphorical images of Kali are utilized for political mobilization in the work of author Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, recognized as the first Bengali writer. *Ananda-Math*, a story set during the horrible Bengali famine of 1770, was serialized in 'Bangadarshan' and then published as a full-length novel in 1882. An ascetic informs Mahendra, the protagonist, about the plight of the homeland in this tale. The land and its past triumphs are associated with the gorgeous figure of the mother-goddess. She is manifested as Kali, the dark mother, in its current, impoverished form. The ascetic narrates: “Look, what the mother has

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come to...Kali, the dark mother. She is naked because the country is impoverished, the country is now been turned into the cremation ground, so the mother is garlanded with skulls.⁴ However, this is only intended to be a temporary situation until the country/motherland is liberated from the clutches of foreign invaders and restored to its former splendor by revolutionaries. What's fascinating is how Kali's imagery is fused with a new linguistic economy, a lexicon of economic devastation and imperial degradation. This phrase is intriguing since the figure of Kali is being used figuratively and metonymically to convey a current historical perspective. The two-fold dynamics underlying this metaphor may be understood since Kali is etymologically tied to 'kala' meaning time. It is argued that Bengal's miserable situation is not permanent, and that a glorious period will come when the motherland is restored to its former splendor via the efforts of the nation's sons. Bankim is sending a warning to the colonial authority by adopting this historical thesis: times (kala) will shift, and Hindustan will be returned to its previous, ancient splendor. 'Bankim Chattopadhyay was one of the first writers, chronologically, to use religious icons as a marker of Hindu nationalism and Hindu cultural identity but he was certainly not the last. In *Women and the Hindu Right*, Urvashi Butalia and Tanika Sarkar have commented on the use and deployment of religious imagery in the politics of the Hindu right in the 1990s.'⁵

According to Jasodhora Bagchi, in the adaptation of Shakti mythology, Comte's 'pouvoir Spirituel' is changed into power understood as a feminine force, and 'Bankim incorporated parts of the folk practices into his elite nationalist mentality.' Furthermore, Bankimchandra's repertory of feminine figures often illustrate a schism in the social narrative—one side of the divide is the polished 'Victorian image of femininity' or the companionate wife, and the 'other' is the figure of the temptress, who is morally and socially destructive. Bankim, on the other hand, went even deeper in the latter stages of his novel-writing. According to Bagchi, at this period, Bankim was focused with the heroic task of upholding Hindu order, and he produced pictures of women who broke conventional canons of femininity in order to express resistance to a time of crisis. Thus, in his books, he has given women nearly 'demonic power' in order to express a 'heightened feeling of crisis,' and the imagery and iconography of Kali reflects this idea: both the vagaries of history and the ravages of time (kala). Thus, the motherland's glorious history, dreadful present,

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and brilliant future are all motifs of an 'appeal for a developing nationalist consciousness.'⁶ The project of contemporary history arose in nineteenth-century India, as Ranajit Guha and others have demonstrated, partially as a result of a new concept of linear time. The cyclical character of time was widely emphasised in earlier Indian/indigenous perspectives on time. Bankim's historical consciousness appears to include both these historical principles as well as Comte's theories of consciousness growth. This is crucial since both historical writing and the novel as a genre evolve through time, and a sense of temporality is required for both. Kali's invocation, with her morally ambiguous symbolism, aided in shaping the outlines of a budding cultural nationalism.

Aurobindo Ghosh and other political activists used Hindu myths and symbols often in their nationalist speech in criticising the Government of British India's decision to split Bengal province in 1905. Militant political leaders generally drew on *Sakta* iconography, particularly images from the Hindu cult of Kali worship, and accepted intellectual arguments for nationalism based on Karthkara's *Vedanta* philosophy, which were founded on modernist, Neo-Hindu interpretations. Nationalists were seen as worshippers of the goddess Kali, who was said to have manifested herself in the form of the nation. Many historians have interpreted the use of this theological idiom during the anti-partition agitation in Bengal as a religious appeal aimed at mobilising the masses in the nationalist struggle. This historical explanation of the usage of Hindu symbols during the anti-partition campaign in Bengal is consistent with Donald Smith's view on the link between religion and political development in his comparative study. According to Smith, religious concerns and symbols may serve as major instruments in the hands of politicians seeking to rally the population, hence political movements in transitional nations frequently become entangled with religion.⁷

The Bengali population's religious affiliations largely matched socioeconomic stratification lines. Islam, Chaitanya's Radha-Krishna Vaisnava religion, and Durga and Kali's *Sakta* worship were the three primary faiths. There was a tiny aristocracy among Bengal's Muslims, but the majority of Muslims were cultivators who had been converted from the lowest

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strata of Hindu society, particularly in east Bengal's rural areas. The *Sakta* Cult provided the religious idiom employed in the campaign against Bengal division.

In 1905, the British decision to separate Bengal Provinces added fuel to an already smoldering political fire. By the end of 1906, Bengal's nationalist leadership had split into two factions: moderate and extremist. The Extremists openly demanded for independence and mocked the Moderates for only requesting additional civil service and legislative council posts. Tilak, the Extremist Maratha leader, was contacted by Bipin Pal and Aurobindo Ghosh in Calcutta, and they resolved to endorse him as the Extremist candidate for the Congress presidency. A rising number of volunteer brigades, gymnasiums, and nationalist groups were formed in response to the anti-partition movement. Physical training, nationalist indoctrination, and swadesi propaganda efforts were among their programmes. The Anusilan Samiti, a radical arm of one of these nationalist organisations, founded the *Jugantar*, a vernacular journal that espoused an ideology of violent revolution, in 1906. In May of 1908, the majority of the *Jugantar* members were arrested for a terrorist bombing. Terrorist samitis (societies) grew rapidly in the same year, and terrorist assassinations continued for a decade, but the terrorists were never able to gain the required public support for a larger revolutionary movement.⁸

Aurobindo Ghosh, the son of a Keyastha doctor, was the militant faction's most prominent thinker. Aurobindo was primarily concerned with the method that the middle class should employ. He thought that the middle class was fundamentally opposed to the British bureaucracy and advocated for an attempt to generate support among the 'masses' since he had little trust that the British administration would freely extend political rights and facilitate the emergence of self-governance in India. To gain political support, Aurobindo utilized Hindu religious symbols and a religious notion of nationalism. Swami Vivekananda, the religious reformer, and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the great Bengali novelist who wrote extensively on Hinduism and the issues of Indian nationalism, had many commonalities in their merger of nationalist and religious ideas. Aurobindo was well-versed in both men's works, which he appreciated much. During his time in Baroda, he made touch with Sister Nivedeta, a notable Swami Vivekananda devotee.

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“In an article in *Bande Mataram* published in 1907 Aurobindo referred to his nationalist ideology as 'political Vedantism'. Aurobindo's political *Vedanta* was quite similar to Vivekananda's practical *Vedanta* except that his philosophy was much more explicitly applied to political action, Aurobindo developed Vivekananda's Neo-*Vedanta* concept that God is the sum total of all human souls into a more elaborate theory that God is incarnated in individuals, in humanity in general, and in communities of humanity. Thus, he advanced the concept that the nation itself is an incarnation of God which he identified with the goddess Kālī. In *Bhawani Mandir* (Temple of the Mother), a pamphlet written in 1905 and widely distributed among secret societies, Auro bindo and his brother, Barindra, wrote that each human soul contains. The divine Sakti and the nation is a mighty Sakti composed of the combined Saktis of its people. The great Sakti which is the nation is identified with the Goddess Kālī, and in this pamphlet Aurobindo called for a new order of sannyasins ready to die for the goddess in her modern incarnation as the nation.”⁹

Aurobindo, a strange blend of religious seer and savvy politician, was acutely aware of the challenges in political organisation in Bengal and India as a result of the educated elite's separation from other groups. Aurobindo's religious nationalism may have been partly a response to his own personal struggle with cultural identification, and partly a response to the difficulty of an anglicized politician seeking a political style that would appeal to a wider population than the English-educated.

Other notable revolutionary politicians in Bengal repeated Aurobindo's use of *Sakta* iconography and political Vednta doctrines. Despite his Vaisnava theological background, Bipin Pal, the second most powerful leader of Bengal's Extremist movement, embraced *Sakta* symbols as well. ‘For example, in May 1907, Bipin Pal gave a speech in Calcutta urging the use of the Kali Pujas to popularize the nationalist movement. He said “I would therefore, recommend the organization of Kali Puja in every important village, every new moon day. It cannot be the ordinary Kali Puja. These pujas have no sanction except on special ceremonial days or for specific purposes. But we have a tradition of Kali worship whenever there are epidemics and troubles in the country... But then it is not the ordinary Kali, but what is called Rakshakali that is worshipped in these times of trouble. Rakshakali is the Kali which protects from evil. Rakshakali is not black but white the symbol not of darkness but of light. And the sacrifices acceptable to Kakshakali are white goats and not black ones. It would not be a bad thing if we could organize public Rakshakali pujas at the present juncture where large crowds could be collected, and 108

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goats sacrificed. It would put courage into drooping hearts. It would impart a religious meaning and significance to our national movements.”¹⁰

Extremist organizations active in Bengal during the anti-partition campaign used *Sakta* symbols to rally their members. The periodical '*Jugantar*,' which was intimately affiliated with Aurobindo, was one of the main propaganda machines of revolutionary doctrine. 'The editors of the *Jugantar*, who were members of the Anusilan Samiti in Calcutta, regarded British administration as fundamentally exploitative and antithetical to Indian progress; they believed that British rule would yield only to force. They advocated the setting up of factories in remote areas, and terrorist assassinations to spark a revolutionary conflict with the British. This terrorist ideology was expressed in a religious idiom. In the *Jugantar* articles, Kālī symbolized the nation, the incarnation of God in the motherland. Kali in her destructive aspect, black with skulls around the neck, was said to represent the degradation of India under foreign rule, the death and famine due to British exploitation. The goddess was also regarded as the symbol of violence and revolution, of the death and destruction necessary before rebirth, and the violent deeds of the revolutionaries were said to be the divine play of the Mother. The traditional animal sacrifice of goats and buffalo to Kali and Durga were given symbolic significance for the revolutionaries, who were called upon to sacrifice the blood of the oppressors and their own blood before the altar of the mother country to redeem her from shame and degradation. The members regarded themselves as young sannyasins who had renounced family and career in the service of the nation symbolized by the goddess Kālī. Offerings were frequently made to the goddess Kali before the start of any mission to give the young cadres strength and courage.’¹¹

Conclusion

In terms of mobilizing the rural upper castes, militant leaders' use of *Sakta* iconography during the anti-partition agitation in Bengal makes political sense. The highest castes were all *Saktas*, and they shared the *Vedanta* philosophical viewpoint. As a result, Aurobindo's political *Vedanta* might be viewed as an attempt to reconcile the English-educated elite's nationalist viewpoint with religious symbols and institutions that appealed to the rural upper castes as well. He seemed

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to believe that the politically active landowners, with their clout in the countryside, would be able to sway the farmers' support, or at the very least their compliance. Those who had not been exposed to English education could grasp the political *Vedanta* ideology established by militant politicians, which provided a nationalist philosophy couched in traditional religious imagery. The focus on political *Vedanta*, combined with a secular appeal to the zamindars' political and economic interests, allowed the Bengali English-educated elite to reconcile with the wider rural upper caste group. Outside of high caste society, however, the *Sakta-Vedanta* language had limited appeal. The extremist leaders' focus on garnering the support of the higher caste voters, who were the only sector of Bengali society that reacted to their demand for active opposition to British rule, was reflected in their use of religious terminology.

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