

Aesthetics, Nationalism, and the Image of Woman in Modern Indian Art

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**Volume 12 Issue 2 (June 2010) Article 4**  
**Kedar Vishwanathan,**

**"Aesthetics, Nationalism, and the Image of Woman in Modern Indian Art"**

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**Abstract:** In his article "Aesthetics, Nationalism, and the Image of Woman in Modern Indian Art" Kedar Vishwanathan discusses how developments in visual culture impacted India's configuration as nation. Between 1880-1945 in Bombay (Mumbai) and Calcutta (Kolkata) a burgeoning visual culture developed in service of anti-colonial nationalism. Used as a method to imagine a nation free of colonial rule, in particular images of women proliferated in private and public spaces. Crucial to this development was the reformulations of modernity based on an ambivalent combination of British and Indian vernacular art. Vishwanathan focuses on how the female was appropriated for the cause of imagining an Indian nation and he examines the influence of political movements such as the Raja Ravi Varma Printing Press, The Calcutta Art Studio, and the Bengali neo-traditionalists. Further, he inquires into the connections and relationship between colonial administration and the Indian populace prior to the onset of elite anti-colonial nationalism in order to understand Indian modernity and the shift in vernacular and visual aesthetics.

**Kedar VISHWANATHAN**

### **Aesthetics, Nationalism, and the Image of Woman in Modern Indian Art**

Between 1880-1945 in Bombay (Mumbai) and Calcutta (Kolkata) a burgeoning visual culture mobilized images for anti-colonial nationalism in order to symbolically structure the nation. Images of women proliferated in private and public spaces whereby these images were used as a method to imagine a nation free of colonial rule. Crucial to this development were the reformulations of modernity based on an ambivalent combination of British and Indian vernacular(s) inclusive of social mores and its associated cultural production — high Victorian visual art and aesthetics. This change was intertwined with the beginnings of the nationalist movement(s), which drew from iconographical elements of Hinduism. In this article, I examine how and why the image of woman was used for the construction of nation. I investigate in particular the influence of political movements in Indian art including movements such as the Raja Ravi Varma Printing Press, The Calcutta Art Studio, and the Bengali neo-traditionalists. I demonstrate how the onset of the change in British and Indian cultural paradigms came to be reconfigured by male nationalists in order to imagine a modern Indian nation. Further, an analysis of the connections and relationship between the colonial administration and the Indian populace prior to the onset of elite anti-colonial nationalism is imperative to an understanding of Indian modernity and the shift in vernacular and visual aesthetics.

British modernity, already established in fields such as education, social mores, aesthetic appreciation, painting, and technologies were, during the 1830s-1880s, being transported from the empire and carried over by ships, merchants, companies, and individuals to the port cities of Bombay (Mumbai), Madras (Chennai), and Calcutta (Kolkata) (see, e.g., Van der Veer; Bayly). These cultural diffusions operated as a reciprocal flow of culture from center to periphery and back again. There was also informational cultural flow, from India, which permeated London. Similarly, ideas of the Enlightenment such as liberty, self-governance, and individual rights seeped into the urban cosmopolitan loci of India. It was in these urban, soon to be colonial, metropolises that reformist movements started, anti-colonial nationalism erupted, and the symbol of the woman became the contested site of modernity between the colonial government and the nationalist movement (see Bayly; Guha and Spivak; Chatterjee). During this early period of cultural and administrative exchange, the British colonial administration rested on the principles of the civilizing mission. The mission would reform activities not deemed correct to the modern institutions of the enlightened empire and formulate new educational curricula based on the Macaulayan model that would reform Indian sensibility by producing subjects loyal to the empire, who were "Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay

<[http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt\\_minute\\_education\\_1835.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html)>). This reforming of sensibilities first started within the established landowning and aristocratic, as well as the *bhadralok* (respectable people) classes and created, to borrow V.S. Naipaul's enigmatic title, "The Mimic Men." It was first in 1830s Bengal that British officials became horrified by practices such as *suttee/sati* (a widow following her dead husband onto his funeral pyre) and the treatment of women in the colony (see Major). These officials pointed to the canonical texts of Hinduism which rationalized such atrocities. Thus, the Indian female was made the signifier of a tyrannical cultural tradition (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* 118). This legitimized the civilizing mission and justified the reforms to "tradition" and brought about conditions for modernity in India.

During the 1830s, Hindu reformist movements such as the Brahma Samaj who supported the 1829 British legislation against *sati*, started to place the female within the same role as the female in Britain. This followed British reform of Indian education and other cultural and religious Hindu practices, such as the Widow Re-Marriage Act of 1856. Early reformers, such as Keshabchandra Sen (1838-1884) from the Brahma Samaj or Raja Rammohan Roy (1774-1833), founder of the Brahma Sabha (1828) who followed these proscriptions were by and large of an elite background. The upper-middle and aristocratic classes have been described by Homi Bhabha as "ambivalent" because they reflected British bourgeois ideals and established their own cultural hegemony over the rest of Indian society. It was these early reformers — "The Mimic Men" — who had imbibed the Western ideals of humanism and individualism and, as Samita Sen notes, considered women's emancipation a pre-condition for national regeneration. This, along with the "trichotomous ideational division on which modern political structures rest, e.g., the state, civil society, and the (bourgeois) family" (Chakrabarty 11), brought the notion of the "modern" Victorian family to traditional India. These reforms came with attempts to improve the lives of women through education. This discourse was based on the modern European

conceptions of freedom and equality as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that "Ruskinian ideals and idealization of bourgeois domesticity" (12). Movements such as the Arya Samaj, founded in 1875 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), preached a return to the Vedic past in Hinduism and a reform of the discourses and practices that had changed as a result of colonial rule. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), the founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, sought to change Hindu tradition, so that they were available to a Westernized audience. He achieved this by incorporating notions of "Hindu spirituality" as superior to "Western materialism" brought to India by an aggressive and arrogant "British nation." Vivekananda, as Peter van der Veer notes, was to create a discourse, which became fundamental to Hindu nationalism (70).

Pivotal to these reformist discourses was, to follow Partha Chatterjee's observation, the breakdown of the two domains of society — the material and the spiritual ("Whose Imagined Community" 6-9, *Nationalist Thought*). The nationalists envisaged the material sphere to be Western and technological, that which allowed the British to dominate Indians. The spiritual sphere was the inner sphere or the sanctum of domesticity where the nationalists did not allow intervention by the British. Simply, the material sphere was masculine and the spiritual sphere was feminine and domestic. The domestic sphere became the domain of India's spiritual singularity, of Indianness (see Chatterjee, "The Nationalist," "Colonialism"). The spiritual domain "was where a fashioning of an inner national identity occurred, where the "difference" and autonomy of the nation could be located. The burden of representing the inner and authentic realm of the nation in nationalist discourse fell largely on the figure of the "modern Indian woman" and this discourse offered new subject positions to women as signifiers of modern tradition steeped in an ancient Hindu past, which imbued the woman with essentialized "Indianness" (Sinha 624-25). The concept of woman symbolized the binary opposition between Indian tradition and British modernity. The nationalists asserted their cultural difference over the British by reforming the one part of their cultural identity they had control over, the spiritual realm and where the metaphorical symbol of the nation — the woman — was placed. As Chatterjee notes, "This was perceived by the nationalists as an answer to the new social and cultural problems concerning the position of women in 'modern' society, and that this answer was posited not on an identity but on a difference with the perceived forms of cultural modernity in the west" (*The Nation* 117). However, Chatterjee discounts the discourse of Indian feminism in the early national movement and also "freezes the gendered logic of Indian nationalism to a single moment supposedly defined by the singular problematic of the assertion of national cultural "difference" from the West" (Sinha 625). Mrinalini Sinha reminds us that this conception of the modern Indian woman was to be seen as the model "citizen of the new nation-state" and that, it was within this paradigm that the "re-articulation of the modern Indian woman as the agent of, and model for, an abstract nationalist Indian modernity" lay (626). This model embodies British and Indian modernity and is a marker for liberal Indian feminism, not an Indian nationalist negation of the British. For instance, Kundamala Devi, writing in 1870 in the Bengali magazine *Bambodhini patrika* writes, "Oh dear ones! If you have acquired real knowledge, then give no place in your heart to *memsahib*-like behavior. This is not becoming in a Bengali housewife" (Kundamala Devi qtd. Chakrabarty 14). While this is seen as following the male nationalist model, Devi writes herself into the discourse, claiming space for the female. It appears that Bengali housewives authorized their use as the marker between tradition and modernity and as the symbol of the new nation. For instance, in 1920, Indira Devi, dedicated her *Nakir ukta* (*A Woman Speaks*) — interestingly enough, a defense of modern Bengali womanhood against criticisms by (predominantly) male writers — to generations of ideal Bengali women whom she thus described: "Unaffected by nature, of pleasant speech, untiring in their service ... oblivious of their own pleasures ... moved easily by the suffering of others, and capable of being content with very little" (Indira Devi qtd. Chakrabarty 14). This became part of the discourse of the female taking on a spirituality associated with goddesses, such as Bharatlakshmi who was associated with the nation. Further, Lakshmi has special significance for Hindus as the goddess of domestic well-being and is worshipped as Vishnu's consort.

The artist Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) was the first Indian artist within the European academic realist and neo-classical aesthetic to paint Hindu mythological scenes and goddesses using the female to embody the nation. He articulated the changing nature of the female as goddesses within his paintings and later in his reproduced images. Varma, who was a *kyshatria* (warrior caste) by birth and whose family were landowners in Kerala, was highly educated in Hindu mythology and Sanskrit. From a young age he showed an interest in painting. He was never taught painting but learnt it himself as he was granted access to watch the traveling Dutch painter, Theodore Jensen, paint at the court in Travancore (see Venniyoor). Varma's time was marked by "the point at which the changing world of court painting in the South merged with new patterns of patronage, professionalism and commercial

success in colonial India. It also marked the maturing and public emergence of the individual "artist" with the full new status associated with designation, distinguishing it clearly from those of 'court,' 'company' or 'bazaar painters'" (Thakurta, "Raja Ravi Varma" 11). His painting *A Galaxy of Musicians* (1889) depicts a scene of eleven Indian women in a state of transition between tradition and modernity. The painting provides a smorgasbord of Indian female types: Tamil, Parsi, Anglo-Indian, Gujarati, Keralite, and others to make up the perfect "anthropological vignette" (Kapur 168). In 1888, commissioned by Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III of Baroda (1863-1939), Varma produced fourteen mythological paintings using as their source the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Varma traveled throughout India to find models who enabled him to record the diverse ethnicities of India's women. The commissioned paintings were destined for the Gaekwad's large Durbar Hall of the newly built Laxmi Vilas Palace in Baroda and there Varma discovered a blend of modernity and the "traditional values of a model kingdom analogical to the site posited in his paintings" (Sheikh 78). The Durbar Hall had a mosaic floor crafted by Italians, mythological paintings by Dutch and French artists, and marble statues of the Raja's family (Desai 43-44). In *Galaxy* Varma added a theatrical dimension: he broke down the fourth wall, or the framing device where a supposed proscenium arch once stood and allowed the viewer a voyeuristic sight of the models who of course do not return the gaze. This disembodied presence, or a strategy of absorption of the beholder, and the subject's lack of awareness of the beholder was a symptom of — as Michael Fried, drawing on Diderot's critical commentary, notes — European academic art from French eighteenth-century history painting, and this technique found its way into the Indian art schools in forms of colonial mimicry. Varma used Western figures as models for his mythological dramas. As Tapati Guha Thakurta notes, Varma drew heavily from the paintings of two French academic artists of his time, Boulanger and Bouguereau. He used their nude figures of Venus and Psyche and their allegorical images of Chastity and Charity and then draped them in Indian costume (Thakurta, "Raja Ravi Varma" 94). Moreover, the *Galaxy's* female subjects are not aware of the beholder's corporeal presence. Eye contact between the model and beholder was reserved for worship of an image or deity and this becomes important with Varma's reproduced images (Pinney "'A Secret of their own country'" 22). Moreover, as Thakurta notes, the models' gaze is sealed off from the gaze of the beholder and it is within this space that Varma was able to depict the "imagined rarefied space of the nation" ("Visualizing the Nation" 51). Varma was able to imagine a community through his collection of Indian women types incorporating the various ethnicities of India's cultures. The painting is an allegory of a nation in transition and a nation being imagined through the gendering of the nation as female.

In 1878 the Calcutta Art Studio was established by former students from the Government School of Art and produced chromolithographs of Hindu mythological scenes (see Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*; Mitter, "Mechanical Reproduction"). The Ravi Varma Fine Arts Lithographic Press, which started production on the outskirts of Bombay in 1894 and the Calcutta Art Studio spread a specifically Hindu visual representation of national identity. These representations created an industry that delivered "print capitalism," defining a discursive space outside of British control or interests where images started to appear in journals, newspapers and calendars as well as advertisements (Anderson 18). Although functioning as commercial companies, Varma's Printing Press and the Calcutta Art Studio were art groups, or even movements, in their own right. Artists leaving art schools joined the Calcutta Art Studio and used their technical training to print and paint Hindu mythological scenes. Their skills in the European perspective helped provide the linear perspective required for the images. This was especially the case with the Calcutta Art Studio that was a place where artists trained with an established artist working in the company. There was a wide range of stylistic variation in Varma's Printing Press, which demonstrates that several artists' work and not just Varma's was printed. Varma authored just fewer than ninety of the images before selling the copyright to Fritz Schleicher, who was the chief technician at the press (Pinney, *Photos of the Gods* 27, 64; Clark, *Modern Indian Art* 12). Large-scale images disseminated by the Calcutta Art Studio were sold at a cheaper rate and were more easily produced than their Calcutta based commercial competitors, such as the traditional *Kalighat* scroll painters. Without the large-scale reproduction of images configured and typified by Varma in the European neo-classical and academic styles, a refutation of these aesthetics by the Bengali neo-traditionalist would not have been possible. These commercial artefacts were the precursors to the Bengali neo-traditionalist, a quasi avant-garde movement that sought to reconfigure Indian aesthetic modernity using pan-Asian aesthetics. In consequence, images of chromolithographed and oleographed goddesses were disseminated and found their way into the private and public spheres of India. This created visual spaces that undermined British rule but they also reaffirmed the patriarchal division of labor, investing women with more of a "spiritual" load as men were "outside" and did not

have time for worship. As Annapurna Garimella observes, "at this juncture, worshipping and tradition became interlocked with gender and art" (33). This was due to the new conditions brought on by colonialism. Chatterjee notes that men underwent a "whole series of changes in their dress, food habits, religious observances and social relations" and that "each of these capitulations now had to be compensated by an assertion of spiritual purity on the part of women" ("Colonialism" 629) and thus "these capitulations" were seen as part of the purity of the goddesses Lakshmi and Durga.

The iconography of Hinduism was a powerful vernacular and aesthetic for the mobilization of the community. Non-elites imagined the Hindu nation because of the prevalence of commonly and easily understood iconography. These images were circulated in public spaces, such as bazaars, that would be frequented by different castes/classes of people (see Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*). Importantly, this circulation within the subalterns and elites produced a horizontal axis of nationalism and not a vertically tiered elite nationalism and thus it enabled the sharing of information across classes and across literate and illiterate groups for the purpose of community mobilization. Commercial distribution channels of printed material comprising of images and texts were received by buyers across India. The image acted as a form of "ritual communication" (van der Veer 78). It is this "devoted viewing" (*darshan*, "sight" or "perspective"), especially of religious believers that connects a community. By using common iconographical elements, as well as sacred meanings, nationalist messages reinstated the past mythical power of the pre-British and pre-Islamic Hindu culture and were instilled within the consciousness of the readers and viewers. Benedict Anderson explains the success of anti-colonial Asian nationalism but Chatterjee reminds us that this success locks India within a paradigm of being perpetual consumers of Western modernity (*The Nation* 3-14). And I argue that this consumption of European modernity in its specific appropriation of woman to service nationalism creates a particular problematic not only in hindsight but also impacting current artistic and social environments of India. The typically Hindu iconographical system operating in the said images was fully realized during the Cow Protection Movement of 1880-1920 (see Pinney, "The Nation (Un)Pictured?") where it is tied to the use of woman as nation. The cow, or Gao Mata (Mother Cow), came to symbolize the mother of the Hindu nation and was intertwined with the devotions shown to Mother India. The sacred nature of the cow's body and the prohibition against killing her and eating her flesh is "made real for Hindus in crucial ritual performances that communicate a great variety of cosmological constructs" (Van der Veer 87). The cow's body is associated with femininity and the female body. The cow was also used in Brahmanical rituals of death. According to Brahmanical belief, a human being during life and death depends on the cow's life. The cow is the symbol of the mother of life and the substance of all things. Cutting the head of a cow is sacrilegious to the Hindu as it would be connected with the beheading of goddesses. The nationalists' preoccupation with the use of past cultural religious traditions such as the popular mother-cults linked to fertility and agrarian rituals in Bengal was also associated with the rise of cow and female iconography. Goddesses such as Kali, Durga, and Chandi who incarnate, in the Puranic traditions, *shakti* (female energy) were transposed upon the woman in the spiritual sphere. As Christopher Pinney notes, the "cow" would, within a mere ten years, be transformed into "Mother India" (*Bharat Mata*) signifying nationality and divinity" (Pinney, *Photos of the Gods* 108).

Now I turn to the importance of the Bengali neo-traditionalists. During the *swadeshi* years of agitation 1903-1908 in Calcutta a school of artists, loosely named the Bengal School or the Bengali neo-traditionalists emerged. They derided Varma's and the Calcutta Art Studio's oleographs as kitsch reproductions, in part owing to the loss of the images' cult status. The "aura" attached to the authentic image was lost because of its reproduction. The derision of Varma's neo-classical European aesthetic and the subsequent questioning of the imports of British modernity was the turning point for a changed modernity based upon a robust, yet flexible, Indian conception of the modern (Mitter, *Art and Nationalism* 262-66; Bharucha 26-55). Although rejecting Varma's aesthetic, the neo-traditionalists continued to use the notion of woman as nation. They also borrowed from the Japanese, engaged in dialogue with them, and positioned themselves closer to their ultra-nationalistic endeavors. This was not a mere rejection of British modernity. For example, E.B. Havell, principal of the Calcutta School of Art (1861-1934), as well as his Japan based US-American colleague Ernest Fenellosa (1853-1908) encouraged a close relationship between Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913) and Rabindranath Tagore. The Bengali nationalists used all of the available Hindu idioms at their disposal to create a modern aesthetic. Using British notions of the role of the woman, they nevertheless challenged the British by incorporating Hindu patriarchal tradition in their revised concept of the woman as a *devi* and placed her within the nexus of the prohibitive and regulatory functions of a changing society. This combined use of Hindu sacraments and celebration of woman as *shakti* created and exteriorized the female as a *devi*, which was read, viewed, and then understood as a site of power to be used against the British.

Abanindranath Tagore's painting *Mother India* articulates this modernity (*Bharata Mata*, 1903-04, wash on paper), which was an expropriation of the mythological past as well as the iconography and media evolving around Mother India in Bengal. He used the conceptions of the mother and transposed these signs upon a woman, Varma's Durga, as well as the indigenous forms of the Kalighat Kali's and created a supposed secular image of the nation. He used the "wash technique" and combined this with mellow color textures and firm lines and shapely body contours (Thakurta, "Visualizing the Nation" 26). The female seems to float into the foreground and background of the painting creating a haloed presence that appears to move toward and away from the viewer's *darshan*. In painting *Mother India*, Tagore was conscious of creating, for the first time, an artistic icon for the Indian nation (Thakurta, "Visualizing the Nation" 26). Tagore's *Mother India* represents a progression from Varma's *Galaxy* to a singular model, *Mother India*. Tagore's image was reproduced and used to imagine a nation as it was displayed on placards during the *swadeshi* rallies. The rallies used the deity as a scared referent that communicated the mythology and spirituality of India's past Hindu power, now inscribed upon the female. These rallies follow from the Hindu *puja* (religious ceremony) of Durga where, in the case of the rallies in Bengal, the deity is carried throughout the streets towards the temple to be installed or to the water to be bathed where the *shakti* of the deity is communicated symbolically to the devotees awaiting their *darshan* (sight). The carrying of Tagore's *Mother India* was a method of using traditional Hindu beliefs for the purposes of anti-colonial practice of the banned sati, which the British colonialists, Hindu reformists, and progressive nationalists alike abhorred. In 1902-1903, in the context of the *swadeshi* movement, young Bengali men resolved to sacrifice their lives fighting for independence from colonial rule by making a pledge to Mother India. In turn, this theme became apparent in visual imagery as in *Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (Rising Art Cottage, Calcutta ca. 1940) which depicts an Indian who, bowing on one knee, offers his decapitated head to Mother India. This devotion of man to woman in return for purity and blessings is also seen in *Astra Dan* (Gift of Arms, Ravi Varma Printing Press, half-tone print, ca. 1940) where Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose (1897-ca. 1945) receives a sword from Durga. This print is modeled on *Shivaji before Bhavani* (Ravi Varma Printing Press, oleograph, ca. 1925) where the goddess Bhavani, another avatar of Durga, hands Chatrapati Shivaji (1630-1680) a sword.

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