



Bharat Mata
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Bharat Mata

Painting by Abanindranath Tagore 1905

Abanindranath Tagore's watercolour painting, titled Bharat Mata, was composed in 1905. Tagore was born in North Kolkata, West Bengal, India. During 1905, India was experiencing the start of The Bengal Partition, a decision made by the British, to divide Bengal into two parts, the East Bengal which at the time had a Muslim majority, and West Bengal which had a Hindu majority, claiming that the reason was for administrative convenience. 'Another important but less explicit motive behind the partition was to create divisions among the Bengali-speaking people, particularly between Hindus and Muslims. The British practised a 'divide and rule' policy, and believed that by dividing Bengal along religious lines, they could weaken the growing nationalist movement that was uniting people across religious boundaries.' - (The Times of India, July 20, 2023). This angered many, and in response, Tagore's painting, which was originally titled Banga Mata, meaning the Mother of Bengal, became a symbol of Indian and was later renamed Bharat Mala, Mother India. Tagore wanted to use his painting to remind the people of India what was important to them, he wanted to 'sell' an idea that tradition is what the people needed. He used many different signs and symbols within the painting to not only represent tradition, but also as a statement of rebellion against the British.

The woman in the painting is Bharat Mata, she is a widely known symbol of Mother India. Here, she is dressed in saffron Sadhvi clothing, (a Sadhvi is a woman who has renounced their possessions and chosen to live a life apart from society to focus on a spiritual life). Tagore chose to present her this way because he wanted her to appear as a traditional Indian woman, he was reminding the people of traditional life, showing them what being Indian was about. 'This is the first masterpiece, in which an Indian artist has actually succeeded in

disengaging, as it were, the spirit of the mother land, giver of faith and learning, of clothing and food, and portraying her, as she appears to the eyes of her children.’ – Bagchi, J. (1990)

She is seen to be walking in lotus scattered water with a glow around her feet. The Lotus, in Hinduism, is associated with Hindu goddesses such as Lakshmi and Vishnu. They represent spirituality, enlightenment, beauty, and purity and are often depicted as thrones for Hindu Gods and Goddesses. ‘Mud-born is a Sanskrit poetic term for the Indian lotus. As a poetic image and visual icon, the lotus symbol evokes the realization that all life, rooted in mire, nourished by decomposed matter, growing upwards through a fluid and changing medium, opens radiantly into space and light.’ – Taschen (2010, p158). In her 4 hands, she is holding a book, a white cloth, a Rudraksha garland (mala) and sheaves of a paddy. Behind her, encompassing her head, she has one blue circle, or halo, within another light orange circle. In a land full of God and Deities, it is understandable one would have an image of a woman with a halo around her head, which gives her a divine appearance, to portray Mother India.

During the Bengal Partition, the Bengali Hindus rebelled against the British by boycotting all British made goods and foreign cloth. Instead, they vowed to wear only traditional clothes made in India. This issue maximized the importance of tradition clothing in this painting as well as the white cloth held in one of her hands. The colour saffron, which makes up most of this painting colour palette as well as the clothing, has held significance in India since ancient times. It is used in worship in Indian temples, for rituals and for pleasing the Gods. It was the colour Buddha and Buddhists wear and was later added to the national flag of India, indicating strength and courage. Here, it is depicting the scared, the strength and the purity of India. Bold and bright, it also signifies awareness, warning and protection, likewise with the jumpsuit of the American prisoner or the vivid markings of the fierce Tiger.

Bharat Mata is portrayed here with four arms/hands. This is common in Hinduism. Deities are often depicted with multiple arms to visually represent their supreme powers and his or her ability to perform several feats at the same time. ‘According to the Indian conception, the idea of total, or totality, is associated with the number four. “Four square” signifies “totality.” Anything complete and self-contained is conceived as possessing all of its four “quarters.” It is established firmly on its “four legs”. - Zimmer H (1992). Four arms signify perfection.

In this painting, each hand is holding an item of significance, a symbol of India. In her first hand, she holds a Rudraksha Garland. Rudraksha are the dried seeds used as prayer beads. They are used by Hindus, Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists to assist in meditation. Here, it represents is not only the spirituality of the nation, to which India is well known for, the gift Mother India presents her people with, but also it is one of the gifts a Mother bestows on her children. ‘The Bharat Mata depicted by Tagore is a gentle, vulnerable, and saintly figure that acts as a reminder of the many gifts our motherland grants us – Shiksha (knowledge), Diksha (spiritualism), anna (food) and Vastra (clothing). No doubt, this painting helped Indians reconnect with their lost heritage.’ – Rana A (2020). The Rudraksha (Diksha) is one of the symbols in the painting used to connect the image of ‘Mother India’ with the emotional connection of ‘Mother’, both life sustaining, nurturing and loved.

The piece of cloth which is held in one of her other hands refers to clothing, it represents India’s clothing and textile sector. During this period, the British had built many cotton mills around India slowly killing off traditional hand-woven fabrics. ‘In 1851, the Bombay Spinning and Weaving Mill was established by Cowasjee Nanabhoy Davar, which led to a

springing-up of various such mills mostly with the capital and efforts of the Parsi community, already successfully engaged in the export and import of raw cotton and finished products to and from Britain. By the 1860s, a few more mills had come up and by 1900, there were more than 190 mills in India.’- The Colonial Period and the Story of Indian Textiles.

European fabrics and clothing designs were being brought in, threatening India’s traditions. Hence, the cloth within the painting also represents tradition and India’s fight against the British with their fast-paced machines. It was used to show a stand against foreign cloth. ‘Like the other sectors of the economy, under the colonial regime, the local textile sector also suffered major losses. It is thus, that the rejection of British machine-made clothes became an important symbol in the Indian freedom struggle. Mahatma Gandhi popularised the use of Khadi (hand-woven clothes made of hand-spun yarn), as a part of his campaign for self-rule or swaraj. The aim was to refuse the usage of British products manufactured on the ruins of the Indian artisans and weavers, and shift to hand woven, locally produced garments.’ – The Colonial Period and the Story of Indian Textiles.

The cloth could also be seen as a symbol of peace. A mostly universal symbol of a white flag has been a symbol of peace, surrender and truce for centuries. Painted in the top hand which could be seen as waving hints that is a possibility. In the third hand, the ‘Mother’ holds a roll of papers. This is a copy of the Vedas and refers to knowledge. It again, as the former objects symbolises not only the obvious, in this case, the knowledge, but also it is another ‘gift’ passed down from Mother to Child. In the fourth and final hand, she holds sheaves of a paddy. This relates to India’s agriculture. The food the motherland provides for her people. ‘In one hand she holds the Vedas that depict the strong education system and literature of the country, in the second she holds the rice paddy emphasizing on the rich food of the land... This, this deity-like woman is thus offering Shiksha-Diksha-Anna-Vastra (education-salvation-food-clothes). All of this was painted to create a sense of feeling of the importance of the country in the minds of Indians.’ – Swadesi (2019)

The painting of Bharat Mata gave people hope during a difficult time. The saintly yet ordinary looking woman Tagore painted captured the attention of India and with her motherly demeanour, is still seen as a symbol of Mother India. Armed with four of India’s most treasured gifts symbolising religion, clothing, knowledge and agriculture as well as it’s less obvious messages of strength, rebellion, freedom and of peace, the painting communicates a simple and traditional India as well as discreetly presenting the difficulties the people of India were facing during this time. The people needed this mother figure to look upon to keep their hopes up and to remind themselves of what being Indian was truly about. ‘Motherhood was the most significant emblem, that was specific to Bengali culture which offered the kind of root that the early Nationalists needed.’ – Bagchi, J. (1990)

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