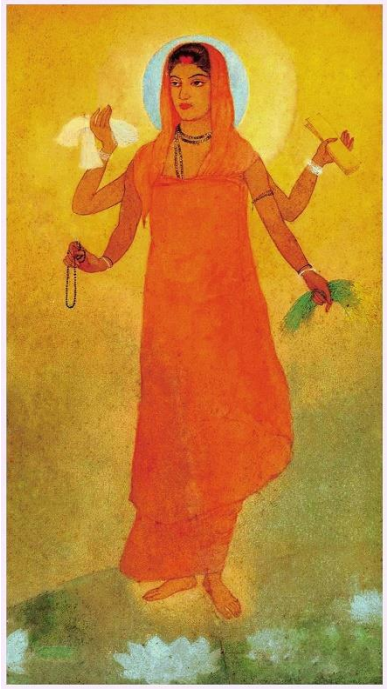

Bharat Mata

Painting by Abanindranath Tagore 1905

(insert quote)

Abanindranath Tagore's watercolour painting, titled Bharat Mata, was composed in 1905. It displays a saffron clothed woman, dressed like a Sadhvi (a woman who has renounced their possessions and chosen to live a life apart from society to focus on a spiritual life). The woman is seen to be walking in lotus scattered water with a glow around her feet. She is holding a book, a white cloth, a Rudraksha garland (mala) and sheaves of a paddy, in her 4 hands. Behind her, encompassing her head, she has one blue circle within another light orange circle.

Abanindranath Tagore was born in North Kolkata, West Bengal, India. During 1905, India was experiencing the start of The Bengal Partition, a British colonial government made the decision to divide Bengal into East Bengal and Assam with a Muslim majority, and West Bengal with a Hindu majority, based on an administrative efficiency.

'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 practiced 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 created this painting, which was originally titled Banga Mata, meaning the Mother of Bengal.

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. Tagore chose to present her this way because he wanted her to appear as a traditional Indian woman, he was 'selling' the idea that traditional is what the people want, they didn't want change. 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 increased the importance of tradition clothing within this painting. 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. It symbolises the purity of the fire. Here it represents the scared, strength and 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. 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.