




---

## HISTORY OF POPULAR PICTURE PRODUCTION IN COLONIAL INDIA: ART AND POLITICS OF THE ‘GOD-PRINTS’ AND THE FORMATION OF A ‘NEW’ HINDU IMAGERY

Biswadeep Chakraborty,  
PhD Research Scholar, Department of History,  
Visva Bharati – Santiniketan, West Bengal

---

**Abstract:** In the second half of the nineteenth century, a printing industry entirely devoted to the production of pictures of gods, goddesses, and mythological themes emerged in India. By the end of the century these cheap mass-produced pictures became the most influential medium of visual communication of the then socially and culturally fragmented Indian society. The pictures were treated not only as religious icons but soon become a medium for the advertisement of goods and services, and subsequently, for ‘political propaganda’ as well in the wake of Indian ‘nationalism’. This paper will explore and elucidate the god-prints and their ideological and sociological significance as India’s first unifying visual medium of communication formation of a ‘new’ nationalist Hindu imagery.

**Keywords:** God-Prints, Lithography, Nationalism, Neo-Hinduism, Print Capitalism

---

“[...] the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.”<sup>1</sup>

These are the words of Benedict Anderson, describing what he calls - ‘*Print Capitalism*’. Anderson argued that the emergence of *nationalism* in Western Europe in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was solely due to the newly developed mass print media such as the daily newspapers and journals which made it possible for millions of people located in far separate areas to imagine themselves as citizens of a united community called a ‘*nation*’.

---

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2015, p.46

Hence he termed it as the ‘*imagined communities*’, “*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”<sup>2</sup> through daily consumption of news and other printed media. Paul Hacker described Indian *nationalism* in its idiosyncratic Indian garb as being the main fillip and distinguishing feature of what he terms the – *neo-Hinduism*<sup>3</sup>, where religion becomes subservient to the nationalist objective. Although Hacker noted that in this neo-Hinduism or modern Hinduism that emerged in the nineteenth century, one thing binds the whole idea that being the predominantly western orientation of its intellectual formations. In this regard he gave example of the *Gita Press*, one of the most influential north Indian publishing houses. The main objective of Gita Press was to promote the so-called distinctive features of the Hindu religion, adhering to the ideals of the *vedas* with emphasis on image worship and propagation of the *puranic* mythologies. Although he noted that even such a puritan and powerful publication house could not prevent the assimilation of foreign elements in its content, for example Christian-style “sermons” and “edifying essays”.<sup>4</sup> In mid-nineteenth century, a lithographic printing industry entirely devoted to the production of pictures of gods, goddesses, and mythological themes emerged in India. By the end of the century these mechanically mass-produced pictures became the most influential medium of visual communication of the then socially and culturally fragmented Indian society. The pictures were treated not only as religious icons but soon became a medium for advertisement of goods and services, and subsequently, for political propaganda in the wake of the Indian

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.6

<sup>3</sup> According to Hacker, Hinduism was essentially an illegitimate concept, an attempt by contemporary Indians writers such as Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan to project a unified Indian identity. By appending the prefix “neo” to the word “Hinduism,” he sought to draw attention to its modern or modernist character. See Joydeep Bagchee and Vishwa P. Adluri, “The passion of Paul Hacker: Indology orientalism, and evangelism,” in *Transcultural Encounters between Germany and India: Kindred Spirits in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Cho, Joanne Miyang, Kurlander, Eric, and McGetchin, Douglas (Ed.), New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 217-218

<sup>4</sup> See Paul Hacker, “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism as Contrasted with Surviving Traditional Hinduism,” in Schmithausen, Lambert (Ed.), *Kleine Schriften*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1978, pp.580-608

‘nationalism’, and helped the people of the sub-continent in imagining themselves as a modern - nation.

Lithography as a printing technology arrived in India as early as the 1920s as argued by Graham Shaw and in the subsequent decades due to its ease of use, portability and cheapness was highly appreciated by the indigenous publishers, thus played an important part in ‘democratizing the print’ in this part of the world.<sup>5</sup> Although credit for first introducing lithography in India goes to a French resident of Calcutta, de Savignac, who learnt of this printing process from Senefelder’s treatise on lithography and built his own makeshift press, which he ran with the help of another French resident of Calcutta, the painter Jean-Jacques Belnos. Savignac and Belnos published in 1832 a widely circulated portfolio entitled *Twenty Four Plates Illustrative of Hindoo and European Manners in Bengal – Drawn on the Stone by A Colin, from Sketches by Mrs. Belnos*.<sup>6</sup> Popular picture production was nothing new in Calcutta as Kalighat *pats* or paintings already created an urban market of consumption of pictures. These pictures used to depict mythological themes around the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon<sup>7</sup> along with social-commentaries<sup>8</sup>. Although mechanical mass-reproduction completely changed the market dynamics, first the woodcut prints of *bat-tala*<sup>9</sup> and then lithographic and oleographic presses for the first time created a new popular market of popular printmaking which overwhelmed Kalighat paintings. Woodcut prints of *bat-tala* followed Kalighat in terms of

---

<sup>5</sup> Shaw, Graham *Calcutta: Birthplace of the Indian Lithographed Book*, Journal of the Printing Historical Society, XXVII, 1998, p.89

<sup>6</sup> See *Twenty Four Plates Illustrative of Hindoo and European Manners in Bengal – Drawn on the Stone by A Colin, from Sketches by Mrs. Belnos*, London: Smith and Elder Cornhill, 1832

<sup>7</sup> As name suggests obviously the major deity in Kalighat paintings was goddesses Kali.

<sup>8</sup> Religious hypocrisy, like *babu* culture and hypocrisy of the higher caste Brahmins, was often mocked through the popular Kalighat paintings for example, the cat eating fish is an allusion to the false ascetic and hypocrite known as ‘biral tapasvi’, connected with an old legend in the Mahabharata where a cat that pretends to live the life of an ascetic, but secretly continues its habit of eating mice. The theme came to represent the falseness of Brahmin community, whose religious orders forbade them from eating meat or fish, but who did so nonetheless.

<sup>9</sup> Woodcut print developed in the area called *bat-tala* of north Calcutta named after a banyan tree in the locality and consequently, the print became well known as bat-tala prints. Bat-tala woodcut prints had a striking resemblance with the Kalighat *pats*; although grafting on the themes and images popularized by Kalighat paintings, sold at a lower price than *pats*, hence captured the same market.

content hence produced both social-commentaries and mythologies. But as the new technology of lithography emerged in the popular print market of the nineteenth century colonial Calcutta, a new market segment cropped up of solely prints of Hindu gods and goddesses and thus emerged the God-Prints.

By the end decades of the nineteenth century lithographic and oleographic prints reigned large in popular picture market of Calcutta, and the *kalighat* paintings and its almost mechanical counterparts of *bat-tala* were in decline. Writing in 1888, Trailokyanath Mukherji commented:

“Until recently, a superior kind of water-colour paintings was executed in Bengal by a class of people called *Patuas*, whose trade also was to paint idols for worship. These paintings were done with minute care, and considerable taste was evinced in the combination and arrangement of colours. The industry is on the decline, owing to cheaper coloured lithograph representations of Gods and Goddesses turned out by the ex-students of the Calcutta School of Art having appeared in the market.”<sup>10</sup>

Hence in this whole process Calcutta based lithographic presses were pioneering a new industry, as well as helping to create a new way for the Hindu deities to appear before their devotees. Now the shift was not only in terms of technology but also in terms of aesthetics, as Tapati Guha-Thakurta argued that the change in art aesthetics that shifted the wheel from two-dimensional Kalighat paintings and *bat-tala* prints towards ‘lithography’ was centered on the ascendancy of oil painting and the increasing demand for a tactile, three-dimensional naturalism in a picture. The use of oil and the cultivation of a realistic, illusionist style had become synonymous with the identity of an ‘artist’, with the ‘Calcutta School of Art’<sup>11</sup> as the

---

<sup>10</sup> Mukherji, T. N., *Art-Manufactures of India: Specially Compiled for the Glasgow International Exhibition, 1888*, Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, India, p.20

<sup>11</sup> Calcutta School of Art was established on August 16, 1854 as a private school but was taken over by the government on June 29, 1864. Being one of the premier art colleges of south Asia, it produced several

central forum for training in this medium and style.<sup>12</sup> The emergence of Indian run chromolithographic presses focusing on ‘god-prints’ tapped this new trend and tendencies towards westernizations and the accommodation of new pictorial and graphical conventions. *Calcutta Art Studio* was founded around 1878 by Ananda Prasad Bagchi (1849-1905) in collaboration with four of his ex-students of the Calcutta School of Art: Nabokumar Biswas, Phanibhushan Sen, Krishna Chandra Pal and Yogendrath Mukhopadhyaya.<sup>13</sup> Bagchi studied at the school himself in the 1860s and subsequently received a senior teaching position there in 1876. He was an accomplished and widely recognized painter himself and illustrated works on Indian Art such as Rajendralal Mitra’s *Antiquities of Orissa* (1869/70). Bagchi’s main purpose in establishing a lithographic press with his students was to produce prints of Hindu gods and goddesses along with other mythological themes. Among the earliest results was the “Fifteen Hindu Mythological Pictures”, a folio of prints with accompanying captions for each image. The studio initially produced monochrome prints that were hand colored, but shifted to oleography<sup>14</sup> soon thereafter. Calcutta Art Studio employed famous portraitists of that time such as Jaladhi Chandra Mukherjee, Pramathalal Mitra and Sashi Kumar Hesh.<sup>15</sup> These coloured lithographs seriously threatened a market previously supplied by hand-painted *kalighat* paintings and woodcut prints of *bat-tala*.

Calcutta Art Studio was the very first lithography studio in south Asia, commercially successful, and creating a whole new market of mechanically (re)produced pictures of gods and goddesses. This emergence of the God-Prints revolutionized the whole printmaking arena of colonial India, cheap, glossy and three-dimensionally aesthetically modern depictions of the

---

renowned artists. See Bagal, Jogesh Chandra, *History of the Govt. College of Art and Craft in the Centenary: Government College of Art & Craft, Calcutta*, Calcutta: Government College of Art & Craft, pp.1-58

<sup>12</sup> Guha-Thakurta, Tapati, *The Making of a new ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, aesthetics and nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p.35

<sup>13</sup> Pinney, Christopher, *‘Photos of the Gods’: The Printed Images and political struggle in India*, London: Reaktion Books, 2004, P.26

<sup>14</sup> Colour lithography.

<sup>15</sup> Mitter, Partha, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p.296

Hindu gods and goddesses created a visual language which highly resonated among the common mass, which was chiefly illiterate. Hence where the power of the ‘printed word’ ended, the visual realm started. Hence the power of this visual medium was soon realized by the commercial market which started using these very images for the advertisement of goods and commodities. Two such examples were the image of goddesses Saraswati and Kali. The first Saraswati print of Calcutta Art Studio, undated titled “Saraswati” was a hand-coloured lithograph depicting the ‘goddess of learning’ according to her Puranic description of white complexion dressed in all white, holding the vina in one hand and books in the other. And below the print a prayer to goddesses Saraswati in Bengali “বীণা-পুস্তক-রাজি-হস্তে! ভগবাতি, ভারতি, দেবি! নামস্তু।।” – this literally means, “Vina in one hand and books on the other, hail the great goddess”. Almost the same image was used in an advertisement print by the Calcutta Art Studio dated between 1885-1890 of some Kuntalbrisha Oil of Kaviraj Binod Lal Sen, sellers of hair oil and tonics for lethargy and other ailments. Although this print was full-coloured chromolithograph instead of the earlier hand-coloured one and another aesthetic change was that the saree of the goddess changed from a white one to a much richer golden one to make her appearance more royal. This is a very good early example of the commercial appropriation of god-prints. Another such example is of the image of goddess Kali. The earliest print of the goddesses by Calcutta Art Studio was of 1883 following the tantric description of her characteristic features i.e. four handed goddess of dark blue to black complexion, garlanded with severed heads and a belt of detached arms, unbound curly-like hair, stepping on lord Shiva hence an extended red tongue. In one hand holding a blood smeared cleaver (*kharga* or *khanra*) and the other a severed head of a demon, as blood drips from the severed head’s neck. The whole setting and background of the print was of a battlefield and below the print a prayer to goddesses Kali in Bengali, “মাহামেষপ্রভং ঘোরাং মুক্তকেশিং চতুরভুজাং।” – which literally means, “Goddess brilliant as a dark cloud”. The same image was again (re)produced by

Calcutta Art Studio for the advertisement of a cigarette brand, named ‘Kali Cigarette’ dated 1885-1890. The interesting thing about this advertisement god-print was its message which reflects clearly the social movements of the then colonial India as it reads on the right margin of the print in Bengali:

“যদি স্বদেশি দ্রব্যের উন্নতি সাধনে আপনাদের জল্প থাকে, যদি দেশের দীন দুঃখী শ্রমজিবিদিগকে প্রতিপালন করা আপনাদের কর্তব্য হয়, যদি যথার্থই ভাল মন্দ বিচার করেন, তবে হে হিন্দু ভ্রাতাগন! এই কালী সিগারেট ব্যবহার করুন।”

This literally means:

“If you care to improve the manufacture of national products, if the welfare of the nation’s poor laborers is your concern, if you have a sense of good and bad, then, O Hindu brothers! Smoke these Kali cigarettes.”<sup>16</sup>

This shows the mood of the colonial society of that time, a Swadeshi movement was in making where people were asked to use the indigenous products instead of the imported ones to support the native laborers and industry. This was further developed by economist Dadabhai Naoroji’s drain of wealth theory and politically appropriated by leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and others. Moreover this is a perfect example of how the popularity of the god-prints turned them into a medium for advertisement of goods and services. This commercial appropriation of the god-prints proves another point that the ‘visual-realm’ created a direct connect with the masses hence their popularity was used as to circulate political messages both directly and indirectly through these commercial advertisement god-prints.

<sup>16</sup> This and hereby from here all the translations from Bengali to English are mine.



The politics of the god-prints was not only limited to the socio-political realm like that of the Swadeshi movement but was also inside the Hindu religion itself. An 1880 hand-coloured lithographic god-print published by H. P. Bhur and printed by Jubilee Art Studio, Calcutta titled “Deva Gopala” is a very interesting print because here gods/goddesses of two completely different sects of Hinduism were appropriated or amalgamated in a way to influence these two sects to co-operate and celebrate each other’s festivals together. The central god/goddess of this print is *Durga*, who is a warrior goddesses raging war against the evil *mahisasur* or the buffalo demon, but here is depicted as a mother goddesses with a maternal side as holding a baby *Krishna* called ‘gopala’, the principal deity of *vaishnavism* on her lap and feeding the child. Hence this print would appeal to the members of the *vaishnava* sect to celebrate Durga Puja, who generally avoid it being a passive peaceful sect in contrast to goddesses Durga, a violent war goddess. Also on the print were present the cow-herder friends of lord *Krishna* in the foreground. Also included in this ensemble were several other gods and goddesses like goddesses Lakshmi, Saraswati along with god Ganesha, Skanda and the holy trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. We can only speculate that this print was a big commercial success as after ten years almost a similar picture was (re)produced by Chore Bagan Art Studio, Calcutta in 1890 titled “দেব গোর্ধ”, depicting the same, baby *Krishna* with goddesses Durga. Although this god-print was not a hand-coloured one but a proper chromolithograph in contrast to the earlier print of the Jubilee Art Studio. As noted earlier popular god-prints were reproduced for commercial advertisement by the lithographic studios but here another point is clear that commercially successful images or imageries of one studio or publisher were easily copied by other establishments to cash in on the demand.

The political engagement of the mass-produced god-prints can be visualized with the very idea of the growth of nationalist sentiment in colonial India. The importance of *cow* as a sacred symbol in Hinduism can be traced back to the very beginning of the religion, in Rigveda milch cows are called *aghnya* – which literally means ‘that which may not be slaughtered’ or ‘not to



be slain'.<sup>17</sup> In the late nineteenth century this enormously potent sacred symbol of Hinduism emerged as a symbol of the *nation*, through the 'Cow Protection' movements. And in these movements lithographic god-prints were utilized to mobilize sentiments of millions through the help of the sacred symbol in the 'visual-realm'. The founder of the Arya Samaj, Dayananda Saraswati formed a cow protection association called 'Gaurakshini Sabha' in 1882. He also published a book from the association on this very cause of cow protection titled *Gokarunanidhi*. The purpose of Dayananda Saraswati behind these endeavours was to rouse Hindu feeling against Christians and Muslims on account of killing of cows and finally to ask the colonial government to ban or prohibit cow slaughter. The nationalist movement in the sub-continent started the use of religious symbolism to unify the whole landmass into a *nation* in the imagination of the common folk using what Benedict Anderson called the *print capitalism*. The holy cow although is not considered by the Hindus as a 'god' in their pantheon but as to be a sacred symbol of life that should be protected and revered, in the *Vedic* scriptures there are several accounts to establish the sacredness of the animal. For example the cow is associated with *Aditi*, the mother of all the gods then in another account there is mention of a 'wish-fulfilling' cow called *Kamdhenu*.<sup>18</sup> According to Hindu mythology, this friendly beast was created by the gods and demons during the "churning of the ocean of milk" (*kūrasāgaramanṭhana*) and was taken by the seven sages (*saptarūi*) who comprise the Great Bear constellation. She is considered the mother of all cows. Her four legs are the Vedas, her horns are the gods, her face the sun and moon, her shoulders Agni, and her legs the Himalayas. So Frederick M. Smith described this very holy cow as the popular and enduring image in Indian art.<sup>19</sup> So it is no surprise that among the lithographic god-prints, the cow prints were

---

<sup>17</sup> Brown, W. Norman, *The Sanctity of the Cow in Hinduism*, The Economic Weekly, Annual Number February, 1964, p.246

<sup>18</sup> See Madeleine Biarreau, "Kamadhenu: The Religious Cow, Symbol of Prosperity" in Bonnefoy, Yves (ed.), *Asian Mythologies*, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p.99

<sup>19</sup> Smith, Frederick M., *The self-possessed: Deity and spirit possession in South Asian literature and civilization*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, pp.404

specific and popular genre prints – where all the Hindu gods, goddesses and ancient sages make up the body of the cow. Thus the cow possesses within her sacred body all the sacred spaces of the Hindu religion. In colonial India several Hindu rather neo-Hindu groups promoted the cow as a symbol of the Indian or rather ‘Hindu’ nation, and the Cow Protection Movements were a major political force since then. The anti-cow-slaughter campaigns were and still are one of the major rally points of the Hindu masses, wherever political opportunism calls for it.

One of the earliest lithographic prints of the holy cow was produced by Kansaripara Art Studio in Calcutta in 11¾ x 15¾ inches in size dated 1890. In this print the cow or the *gau-mata* encompasses within its body more than thirty Hindu gods, goddesses and sages, all labeled. A woman milks this holy cow, and her little boy asks for a cup of milk. This detail of the little boy asking for milk is allegory of baby *Krishna* nicknamed “gopala”.<sup>20</sup> Other hopeful recipients, under the cow’s rear legs, are Englishman, Muslim and Parsee. On the front of the cow sits a Queen-like woman, labeled in the print as the “রানি ধনদেবী” or the “Queen of Wealth”. Standing to the left is a dark complexioned man with a moustache holding a mace, labelled in the print as “যম” or “Yama” the Hindu god of death, who threatens to take the holy cow off to death and also placed a string around queen of wealth’s neck. Behind the cow stands a sage like man with long black beard, labeled in the print as “ধর্ম” or “Dharma” the cosmic law of rigorousness, attempting to stop Yama. Another queen like woman standing behind the cow trying to stop Yama, labeled in the print as “বিশ্ব রাজলক্ষ্মী” i.e., the personification of the holy-cow, the Cow-Mother, as is clear from the title of the god-print, “বিশ্ব রাজলক্ষ্মী গোমাতা” (Visva Rajalakshmi Gomata) i.e. All-Encompassing Auspicious Cow-Mother. The reference of these cow protection themed god-prints and their impact can be heard in the official

---

<sup>20</sup> The story of lord *Krishna* growing up among the cowherds of Vrindavan is one of the most well mentioned episodes of Mahabharata, where he is especially mentioned as a milk loving kid, who loves to drink cow-milk and butter.

documents of the colonial government. As one of the memos from Lord Lansdowne, the then Viceroy of India to the Earl of Kimberley dated December 27, 1893 provides a clear sense of the gamut of visual iconography and symbols which were made to do the work of cow protection during the late nineteenth century:

“In addition to the inflammatory harangues delivered to meetings of Hindus, [wandering ascetics] have distributed throughout the country pictures of the cow, of a kind calculated to appeal strongly to the religious sentiment of the people. One of them, for instance, depicts a cow in the act of being slaughtered by three Muhammadan butchers, and is headed 'the present state'. Another exhibits a cow, in every part of whose body groups of Hindu deities and holy persons are shown, being assailed by a monster with a drawn sword entitled the 'Kali Yug' but which has been largely understood as typifying the Muhammadan community.”<sup>21</sup>

Along with Calcutta as a major production center of the lithographic god-prints in the nineteenth century colonial India, Poona (now Pune) in western India was another major city. In both Calcutta and Poona as a matter of pure coincidence major lithographic printing presses were established in the very same year of 1878, noted Christopher Pinney.<sup>22</sup> The Chitrashala Press was started in 1878 by Vishnu Krishna Chiplunkar, who himself was a major nationalist thinker and figure in the Bombay Presidency. The very first successful god-print of the Chitrashala Press was of Rama and Sita along with Hanuman, Lakshmana and others, titled *Rampanchayatam* or the Rama's assembly, which within a month sold around two thousand copies, noted R. P. Kanitkar.<sup>23</sup> The mood of colonial India in the end decades of the long nineteenth century was of *nationalism*, and one of the major figures of western India was the

<sup>21</sup> Lord Lansdowne et al., memo, 27 Dec. 1893, India Office Records, London, L/P & J/6/365, file 84, p.7 in Pinney, Christopher, *The Nation (Un)Pictured? Chromolithography and 'Popular' Politics in India, 1878-1995*, The University of Chicago Press, Critical Inquiry, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Summer, 1997), pp. 834-867

<sup>22</sup> Pinney, Op. cit., p.46

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.48

highly revered Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a staunch extremist in the nationalist political landscape. Tilak's genius was to use 'religious iconography' as a mode of mass appropriation and contact. He started in 1894 the *Ganesh Utsav* or the celebration of lord Ganesha, which eventually became a rallying point for protest against the British rule as it evoked the struggle of Shivaji, the charismatic Maratha ruler who displaced the mighty Mughal rule from the Deccan. Here the now the Mughal empire is the British empire and hence the people must fight as Shivaji fought against the alien rule. Gordon Johnson argued that the British realized that in Poona they were dealing with proud men, past masters at the art of intrigue, and puffed up with political ambition.<sup>24</sup> Sir Richard Temple, Governor of the Bombay Presidency noted in 1879:

Throughout the whole of the Deccan, the mind of the people is [...] affected by the past associations of Maratha rule, which, so far from being forgotten, are better remembered than would ordinarily be expected, and by the long retained memory of the Maratha uprising against the Mahomedans [...] This memory constantly suggests the analogy between the position of the British and that of the Moguls in the Deccan. There is a general tendency also to criticise to an extreme degree, not only the proceedings of Government and its officers, but also the national conduct and policy of the British in respect to India.<sup>25</sup>

Thus Tilak used the festival to send a clear message to the colonial rulers that they are the same folk who once fought valiantly for their motherland and if necessary will do the same, just this time it will be against the British rule. This was the first time that a pan-Indian political figure used the religious iconography to rally the masses against the colonial forces. The Ganesh festival was the personification of the past grandeur and strength of the Maratha people of the Deccan and hence became the hotbed of politics. Therefore several god-prints of Ganesha were

---

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, Gordon, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism: Bombay and the Indian National Congress*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 53

<sup>25</sup> Minute by Sir Richard Temple, 31 July 1879, cited by Johnson, *Ibid.*, p. 54.

produced by the Bombay and Poona based lithographic presses, for example one such Ganesha print was published by the Ravi Uday Vijay Folio Works of Ghatkopar by Anant Shivaji Desai titled “गणपती” (Ganapati) dated 1910, where the four handed lord Ganesha was sitting on a royal throne and at his feet is his mount the mouse eating sweetmeats. Another famous Ganesha print was published by the Ravi Varma Press of Malavli-Lonavla titled as same “Ganapati” dated somewhere between 1910-1920, but here lord is not alone but with his two wives, Riddhi and Siddhi, holding one with his trunk while the other wife sits pensively waiting her turn. Another similar Ganesha print was printed by Ravi Udaya Vijaya Offset Litho of Ghatkopar in the 1910s where Ganesha is sitting with eight Nayikas, the amorous consorts of lord Ganesha’s harem, titled “गणपती अस्तनायका” or “Ganesha and the Eight Consorts”.

So we can see that at the end of the nineteenth century in the wake of the Indian ‘nationalism’ ‘nationalists’ realized the potential that lay in harnessing popular mythological images for a nationalist cause. They saw in god-prints the portrayal of a glorious past, the propagation of which would induce in the beholders a sense of belonging to a great and once glorious tradition, and its leaders making the most of a rich heritage replete with heroic legends from ancient epics which were deeply ingrained in many layers of the Indian psyche. The sheer reverence and admiration for these legends could be readily manipulated into intense nationalist outburst. The transformation of this passion into uniform images that could be easily replicated and widely distributed became one of the most potent weapons in the hands of those leading the nationalist movement. In these pictures sometimes gods were replaced with national heroes equipped with nationalistic paraphernalia and national leaders were projected almost like gods.<sup>26</sup> For example in one of the famous Ravi Varma print titled “शिवाजी भवानी” (Shivaji Bhavani) published by Ravi Varma Press, Malavli, Bombay in 1925, it was depicted that goddess Bhavani (Durga)

---

<sup>26</sup> See Neumayer, Erwin and Schelberger, Christine, *Bharat Mata: India’s Freedom Movement in Popular Art*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2008

handing the sword of victory to Shivaji, the great Maratha ruler, this particular print was printed in continuance to the independence movement led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, in the Bombay Presidency during late nineteenth century, who defied *Shivaji* as a national hero. Similarly during the Second World War in 1945 a similar image was printed in a Half-tone lithographic print by publisher SNS titled “অস্ত্রদান” or ‘*Astra Dan*’ where Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose receives the sword from the a goddess<sup>27</sup>, this picture was completely modeled on the popular print of Shivaji-Bhavani. As Shivaji, the Maratha hero received the sword from goddesses Bhavani to defeat the enemy, so did Netaji receive a sword from the goddess.

“Sometimes as I reached a gathering, a great roar of welcome would greet me: Bharat Mata ki Jai!—Victory to Mother India! I would ask them unexpectedly what they meant by that cry, who was this Bharat Mata, Mother India, whose victory they wanted? [...] The mountains and the rivers of India, and the forests and the broad fields, which gave us food, were all dear to us, but what counted ultimately were the people of India, people like them and me, who were spread out all over this vast land. Bharat Mata, Mother India, was essentially these millions of people, and victory to her meant victory to these people. You are parts of this Bharat Mata, I told them, you are in a manner yourselves Bharat Mata, and as this idea soaked into their brains, their eyes would light up as if they had made a great discovery.”<sup>28</sup>

The idea of Mother India broadly for the first time came into visual dimensions with the famous 1905 painting of Abanindranath Tagore titled Bharat Mata. The mother goddess depicted by Tagore was a saffron saree-clad four-armed goddess who holds the symbols of India’s

<sup>27</sup> Here the goddess is depicted with eight hands, holding a *chakra* (a disc like weapon), a bow, an arrow, a *shankha* (a conch shell of ritual and religious importance in Hinduism), a *gada* or mace and a tricolor flag with a *charkha* (spinning wheel) of the Indian National Congress origin in the middle.

<sup>28</sup> Nehru, Jawaharlal, *The Discovery of India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985, p.60

independence and self-reliance viz-a-viz, a sheaf of rice, a book, a rosary and a piece of cloth: symbolizing food, knowledge, religion and clothing. The painting is also considered significant because of its historical value and since it had helped in conceptualizing the idea of a mother goddess India or *Bharat-mata*. Nephew of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath is considered the foundational figure of the Bengal School of Art and is also hailed as the ‘father of modern Indian Art’ who reinvented Rajput and Mughal miniature painting style from the influence of western models of art. Although initially Abanindranath painted the very image as *Banga-Mata* or Mother Bengal during the heydays of the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal in protest of lord Curzon’s division of Bengal. But in one of his memoirs Abanindranath noted that although he had conceived his image as *Banga-mata* at first but later, almost as an act of generosity towards the larger cause of Indian nationalism, decided to title it ‘*Bharat-mata*’.<sup>29</sup> But even before Abanindranath Tagore, Raja Ravi Varma attempted to visualize Mother India as a goddess in one of his oil paintings. This depiction of the Goddess in a royal red saree holding a hook, a snare, an arrow and a wand seems to have been Ravi Varma’s attempt or idea to create Goddess India with two vahanas i.e., two lions – the lion of goddess Durga and the lion of Britannia. However the art critics and several art historians termed the painting as a mirror that reflects the Indian middle class ambition at the end of the nineteenth century: thriving indigenous culture under the benevolent rule of Britannia. Hence definitively it was Abanindranath’s *Bharat-mata* which germinated the later renditions of the mother nation but Ravi Varma’s iconography of the mother goddess with her fierce vahanas i.e., lions unlike Abanindranath’s peaceful depiction of the mother goddess was further used by several later lithographic prints at the peak of Indian national movement for independence. For example in 1935 Ravi Udaya Vijaya Photo-Litho offset works based in Ghatkopar, Bombay published a lithograph titled ‘Hinddevi’ or the “Goddess India”, with the Indian National Congress’s flag

---

<sup>29</sup> See Bose, Sugata, *The Nation as Mother and Other Visions of Nationhood*, Viking: Penguin Random House India, 2017



in her hand standing with her vahana, the lion which definitely taken from Ravi Varma's iconography, in front of the snow topped Himalayas. Another black and white lithographic print dated 1935 by an unknown publisher titled "Bharat Mata" on the bottom of the print and "Jai Hind" on the top in three different languages. The Bharat-mata in the lithograph is leaning against an elephant holding a lotus flower in his trunk, with lion sitting at her feet and in the background can be seen the goddesses Saraswati (knowledge) and goddesses Lakshmi (wealth). Another oleograph titled "Hinddevi" was published by Joshi Art Work, Kala Mandir in 1945. In this lithograph the influence of both Ravi Varma's goddess India with two lions (1898) and Abanindranath's *Bharat-mata* (1905) can be seen. As here goddess *Hinddevi* is depicted as an ascetic in a white saree and *rudraksha* necklace and arm-bands holding a trident (clearly an ascetic-themed goddess inspired from Abanindranath's *Bharat-mata*), and at her feet, side and behind one lion and two lionesses can be seen (probably inspired from Ravi Varma's iconic oil painting of goddess India with two lions).

Another depiction of the mother nation in a 1931 print titled "दुखी माता" i.e. Sad Mother published by Shyam Sunder Lal, picture merchant, Chowk, Cawnpore, is a little bit different from the previously discussed iconographies inspired by either Abanindranath (1905) or Ravi Varma (1898). Here a woman is depicted in shackles leaning against a broken pillar amidst darkness. The only source of light is a candle flame titled as "स्वतंत्रता" or independence, and in this flame of independence martyrs flutter to get devoured like moths, and some of the moths are individualized like 'Bhagat Singh' 'Rajguru' and 'Sukhdev'. And in the background from the smoke of the candle flame rises lord Krishna. This strange print is a perfect example of associative visualization of the martyrs of the freedom struggle in the god-prints. As the struggle for freedom movement progressed many such prints were published by the printmakers and printmaking houses throughout the sub-continent where the national heroes of the freedom struggle were situated in a mythological theme and visualization. For example, in

one of the earliest god-prints published by the Calcutta Art Studio dated between 1885 and 1890 titled “*Chinnamosta*” depicted the goddess Chinnamastā<sup>30</sup> who stands on Krishna and Radha making love in a large lotus. She has cut off her own head with a sword and is holding the same in her hand, and the blood from her neck spurts out into the mouths of two naked female figures and her own severed head. Several other Chinnamastā prints were printed throughout the sub-continent over the years. Now the visual narrative of Chinnamastā was later used as an associative visualization to depict the sacrifice of the heroes of the struggle for freedom. In a 1945 print titled “सुभाषचन्द्र बोस की अपूर्ब भेंट” i.e., “The gift of Subhash Chandra Bose” published by Shyam Sunder Lal, picture merchant, Chowk, Cawnpore, Bose is depicted in his INA (Indian National Army) uniform holding his severed head as blood drips from the severed head's neck in the ground forming the shape of the map of India over which appears “जय हिन्द” (Jai Hind) means ‘Hail India’. At Bose’s feet are piled the heads of earlier martyrs of the struggle. So here the pictorial metaphor of self-sacrifice for the motherland is inspired from the iconography of the self-sacrificing goddess Chinnamastā. In another print titled “सुभाष बलिदान” i.e. “The Sacrifice of Subhash” published by Dayal’s Press, Delhi in 1950 the self-sacrifice iconography was again borrowed from the iconography of the great goddess Chinnamastā. In this print Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose is offering his bleeding head to the mother nation or Bharat-mata (mother India). In the blood pool are the sacrificed heads of other martyrs of the freedom struggle. Above in the cloudy sky is the Red Fort as the symbol of power in India to which Subhash Chandra Bose carries the tricolor flag.

---

<sup>30</sup> Goddesses Chinnamasta is one of ten Mahavidyas or goddesses from the tradition of Tantra, and a ferocious aspect of Shakti. She represents both the aspects of nature as a ‘life-taker’ and a ‘life-giver’ and also emphasize upon the aspect of ‘self-sacrifice. See Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, "Mystery, Wonder, and Knowledge in the Triadic Figure of Mahāvidyā Chinnamastā: A Śākta Woman's Reading" in Pintchman, Tracy; Sherma, Rita D. (Eds.). *Woman and Goddess in Hinduism: Reinterpretations and Re-envisionings*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p.61

Thus, the visual narrative of the god-prints helped in the formation of a 'new' nationalist Hindu imagery and as Benedict Anderson noted that the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.<sup>31</sup> Hence situating the god-prints during the heydays of the struggle for freedom in India must be understood against the then backdrop of the large non-reading population that may not understand written words but definitely understood the visual language of the god-prints.

### Works Cited:

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2015

Bagal, Jogesh Chandra, *History of the Govt. College of Art and Craft in the Centenary: Government College of Art & Craft, Calcutta*, Calcutta: Government College of Art & Craft

Bose, Sugata, *The Nation as Mother and Other Visions of Nationhood*, Viking: Penguin Random House India, 2017

Brown, W. Norman, *The Sanctity of the Cow in Hinduism*, *The Economic Weekly*, Annual Number February, 1964, p.246

Guha-Thakurta, Tapati, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992

Johnson, Gordon, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism: Bombay and the Indian National Congress*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005

Joydeep Bagchee and Vishwa P. Adluri, "The Passion of Paul Hacker: Indology Orientalism, and Evangelism," in *Transcultural Encounters between Germany and India: Kindred Spirits*

---

<sup>31</sup> Anderson, Op. cit., p.46

*in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Cho, Joanne Miyang, Kurlander, Eric, and McGetchin, Douglas (Ed.), New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 217-218

Lord Lansdowne et al., memo, 27 Dec. 1893, India Office Records, London, L/P & J/6/365, file 84, p.7 in Pinney, Christopher, *The Nation (Un)Pictured? Chromolithography and 'Popular' Politics in India, 1878-1995*, The University of Chicago Press, Critical Inquiry, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Summer, 1997), pp. 834-867

Madeleine Biardeau, "Kamadhenu: The Religious Cow, Symbol of Prosperity" in Bonnefoy, Yves (ed.), *Asian Mythologies*, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p.99

Mitter, Partha, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994

Mukherji, T. N., *Art-Manufactures of India: Specially Compiled for the Glasgow International Exhibition, 1888*, Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, India

Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, "Mystery, Wonder, and Knowledge in the Triadic Figure of Mahāvidyā Chinnamastā: A Śākta Woman's Reading" in Pintchman, Tracy; Sherma, Rita D. (Eds.). *Woman and Goddess in Hinduism: Reinterpretations and Re-envisionings*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p.61

Nehru, Jawaharlal, *The Discovery of India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985, p.60

Neumayer, Erwin and Schelberger, Christine, *Bharat Mata: India's Freedom Movement in Popular Art*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2008

Paul Hacker, "Aspects of Neo-Hinduism as Contrasted with Surviving Traditional Hinduism," in Schmithausen, Lambert (Ed.), *Kleine Schriften*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1978, pp.580-608

Pinney, Christopher, *'Photos of the Gods': The Printed Images and Political Struggle in India*, London: Reaktion Books, 2004

Shaw, Graham *Calcutta: Birthplace of the Indian Lithographed Book*, Journal of the Printing Historical Society, XXVII, 1998, p.89

Smith, Frederick M., *The Self-Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006

*Twenty Four Plates Illustrative of Hindoo and European Manners in Bengal – Drawn on the Stone by A Colin, from Sketches by Mrs. Belnos*, London: Smith and Elder Cornhill, 1832

NAVAJYOTI FEB 2020