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**“Vande Mataram!”: Constructions of Gender
and Music in Indian Nationalism**
André J. P. Elias

Abstract: This article juxtaposes the iconic performances at the Wagah (Pakistani-Indian) border with a genealogical analysis of “motherland” symbolism in Indian cultural nationalism in order to illuminate the relationship between gender and national ideology. Drawing from archival research and ethnographic experience, I follow the development of India’s national song, “Vande Mataram,” exploring its evolution and impact through the independence movement into the modern-day Hindu golden age. Drawing from postcolonial theory, feminist perspectives, literary analysis, and critiques of nationalism, I examine the tensions between tradition and modernity in Indian culture, looking at the power structures that subordinate gender to nationalist ideologies.

Introduction

“Vande Mataram!” A deafening echo erupts from the assembled masses. “Jai Hindustan!” Again the crowd roars, hoping to sonically crush their ideological enemies across the gates. “Hindustan Zindabad!” Cresting the tops of two half-stadiums wave dozens of flags, and in between march face-to-face a powerful display of Indian and Pakistani military pomp. “Jai Ho!” Electronic beats pummel the small Punjabi town of Wagah, where on the Indian side, women dance and take turns charging the border fence proudly bearing the symbols of their nation. —Personal experience, August 2010

Translated as “hail to the mother,” “Vande Mataram”—the song and slogan— has a long and controversial history as one of the most powerful symbols of India’s independence movement. Originally published as lyrics in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s novel *Anandamath* (1881), “Vande Mataram” has been continuously remade, with more than a hundred versions produced in the twentieth century. Its appearance as a nationalist mantra at the infamous Wagah border ceremony affirms its symbolic capital— weaponized in daily rituals, which I argue, reinforces heteronormative social hierarchies intimately connected to India’s unique sense of cultural nationalism. This article addresses issues of gender and patriarchy in Indian cultural nationalism by constructing a hermeneutic arc from the performances I observed at the India-Pakistan border, to literary origins of a politicized South Asian motherland, to an analysis of modern musical productions of “Vande Mataram.” These contexts highlight the power of motherland symbolism in India, revealing the evolution and manipulation of this image by the state, modern literati, and religious ideologues.

This work follows in the footsteps of other scholars of nationalism and postcolonialism who focus diverse feminist critiques through the lens of literature and the visual and performing arts (Layoun 1994; Lui 1994; Natarajan 1994). By interpreting tropes found in literary sources, much of the political evolution of a symbolic construction can be understood and critiqued in light of its cultural impact. In such studies, culturally salient metaphors like the motherland are often a starting point in talking about gender, violence, and nationalism (Evangelista 2011, 1). The political nature of the motherland trope promotes an explicit connection between women’s bodies

and the nationalist project, where the female body serves as a “boundary marker” of ideologically or ethnically opposed communities (Kandyoti 1991, 128). Conflict and gender-focused violence along national borders around the world illustrate this relationship, where sexual assault becomes symbolic of “conquered terrain” (Ranchod- Nilsson and Tétreault 2000, 20) in ethnic and religious violence. As I argue in this case study, the cultural production of symbols that promote gendered associations with the nation then become very dangerous for those they idealize because their bodies become a focal point for nationalist aggression and manipulation. The relationship between gendered bodies and nation building has inspired both groundbreaking theory and calls for political activism (Mills and Sen 2004; Puar 2007). Jasbir Puar, for example, addresses homonormative discourse in the US imperialist war on terror, positioning even nonbinary gendered identities as subservient, or at least acquiescent, to the demonization of the “uncivilized” other. While my example focuses on codification of traditional gender roles, the logic of Puar’s analysis of nationalism’s power over gender remains poignant. Thus, at the crux of my critique is how nationalist discourse inherently positions cultural pride at birth against the other, deploying all gender identities against both physical and existential threats to the homeland ideology.

Discussing the relationships among music, gender, violence, and nationalism requires sensitivity and measured rhetoric, and my background as a cisgender male, foreigner, and ethnomusicologist interested in postcolonial politics undeniably colors and complicates my perception of these topics. Ethnomusicology’s emphasis on self-reflexivity necessitates awareness of my subjectivity, and without a doubt, this project would benefit from more interviews with Indian women from different religious and socioeconomic positions. Nevertheless, the ubiquity of the phrase and sentiment of *vande mataram* across my time studying and experiencing India inspires confidence that this analysis of the exploitative power of nationalist symbolism will yield a deeper understanding of this slogan’s potency. Ultimately this essay critiques the employment of “Vande Mataram” in Indian nationalist performances, arguing that it reinforces a history of xenophobic and gendered associations with national purity. As this research was initially inspired by an ethnographic experience at the India-Pakistan border ceremony, the bombastic display of national pride at Wagah is a useful point from which to begin a discussion of the role of gender in contemporary Indian nationalism.

Wagah, a Ritual of Confrontation

The daily scene at the Wagah border is at once the most contrived display of national pride and one of the most iconic and visceral representations of both Indian and Pakistani nationalism. This ceremonial lowering of the flags at dusk began in 1959 and has been described as “carefully choreographed contempt” (Jacobs 2003) and “unabashed chauvinism” (Butalia 2013). The border ceremony is an infamous representation of national ideologies that are positioned in contrast to each other (Jaffrelot 2002, 7), reflecting the violent history of partition, numerous military clashes, a protracted nuclear standoff, and identities wrought from the political and religious divide. Wagah straddles the national boundary, declaring itself a gateway to the other, a symbol so enduring and complex that it carries a representation of the history of Pakistani and Indian nationhood. There is no more common a place to hear national anthems, nationalist songs, slogans, and chants, including “Vande Mataram.”

I set out to the Wagah border ceremony during a 2010 trip to the state of Punjab along with three female colleagues from the American Institute of Indian Studies. On the streets of Amritsar, ironically close to the Golden Temple,¹ this patriotic event was advertised as a colorful, fun-filled show with music, dancing, and performances by the Indian military. As foreigners with only a few months of collective experience in India, our tourist instincts kicked in, and after a 45-minute bus ride, we arrived at the border. Once there, we were quickly ushered into parallel security lines where from afar I was surprised to witness a frenzied atmosphere in what seemed an unlikely place: the gender-segregated waiting line for women. After a chaotic 20 minutes in what can only be called a stampede, my companions emerged bruised and exhausted, having pulled a young child from the throng who was being crushed by a mob struggling to enter the arena for the privilege of dancing at the center with the national flag. Once the scene had calmed, all perceived foreigners, including my group, were marched to the stands closest to the border gates with a prime view of the ceremony. From there, we could observe a highly manicured ritual of national physicality that funnels the energies of a traumatic, historical schism down the causeway toward the border.

On both sides, in similar uniforms, Indian and Pakistani soldiers march back and forth to the fence that divides them. At this crossing, the master of ceremonies on the Indian side orchestrates a contentious call and response to challenge the decibel levels of the opponent by shouting “Vande Mataram,” “Jai Hindustan,” and “Hindustan Zindabad,” followed by moments of silence to hear Pakistan’s retort. Aside from different versions of “Vande Mataram,” the Indian sound track includes the national anthem “Jana Gana Mana,” alongside “Jai Ho” and other Bollywood dance hits, loud enough to drown out any perception of the activity on the other side. Dancing ensues, and women of all ages gleefully volunteer to run large flags up to the gate to see and be seen by the other side. Notably, women were represented on the Indian side in the military marches for the first time in 2010, and their appearance elicited the most cheers as a defiant symbol of India’s more gender-inclusive cultural ideology. During my visit and in subsequent discussions it was clear that Pakistan’s celebration at the time featured little if any participation by women, making the gender contrast in this nationalist standoff a distinct point of pride for many Indians. Since this visit, the Pakistan Rangers have reportedly matched India’s Border Security Forces (BSF) by including women soldiers as part of the ceremony. Women’s participation has increased visibly on the Pakistan side following a declaration by both countries in 2012 to match the other’s ceremonial structure and constituency. This competition for gender parity in nationalist displays can be interpreted as modernizing cultural developments or as evidence of the power of state ideologies to co-opt gender identity into nationalist machinery.

Whistles and bugles mix with heavy Punjabi bhangra rhythms; the music and choreography at Wagah are crafted by both national governments in competition and cooperation, much like other nationalist images and symbols (Roy 2007). Through daily social reproduction, a specific set of symbolic values is imprinted onto the audience, reminding participants of the struggle for independence and promoting identification with religious and gender norms as well as a spirit of the nation, positioned against the ideological other. Amitava Kumar writes:

The ideology of nationalism is an ideology of difference, a return to roots, a vision of wholeness. That's why so many visitors to Wagah seem to take comfort in a white line painted on the ground. The line assures the viewer that the border exists, clearly defined and zealously protected. The line returns more than one-sixth of the world's inhabitants to a moment in their history, more than fifty years ago, when they awoke to freedom. (2001, 47)

The Wagah border scene can also be read as a performance of national bodies (Mills and Sen 2004), where carefully crafted ideals of masculine and feminine power are reinforced through a symbolic construction of culture, which, as is often the case, is invented and shaped by the elite (Wagner 1975). During my visit, national differences were represented through the celebratory role of women as dancers, revelers, and culture bearers, which come across as liberal manifestation of gender roles promoted by India's secular democracy. With Pakistan matching these efforts to include women in the ceremony, both sides now project an idealized form of national womanhood at the border. While this can be a positive and empowering form of participation for women, bearing the burden of tradition and national purity has a rather insidious history, exacerbated through the colonial experience where the codification of gender roles in South Asia became part of the nationalist imperative (Chatterjee 1989). Colonial and indigenous elites saw women's roles and representations as a battleground for the modernization and preservation of Indian culture, inspiring many of the social movements of the nineteenth century. Vande mataram was born of that experience, and sovereign India has recycled this theme to promote a vision of nationalism that is heavily imbued with a modern Hindu spirituality and a sacralization of the soil and the body.

The recitation of "Vande Mataram" as a mantra at places like the Wagah border is a practice that complicates Eric Hobsbawm's definition of tradition, described as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules, and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, 1). The continuity of motherland symbolism has been gradually revised for the Indian public, redirecting the drive for independence from the British toward a sense of self-identity in contrast to Pakistan. The symbolic value of vande mataram expresses the struggle for autonomy, power, and freedom by positioning Hindu nativist identity within the Western schema of the nation-state. Put precisely by Ashish Nandy, "[T]he anti-Muslim stance of much Hindu nationalism can be construed as partly a displaced hostility against the colonial power which could not be expressed directly because of the new legitimacy created within Hinduism for this power" (1983, 267). From this perspective, the trope of the motherland was unifying for the democratic majority Hindus but, on the whole, divisive for the anticolonial movement invested in the secular idea of the nation-state. The partition of South Asia was the result of these political contentions over religious rights, where secular politics battled with religious and cultural ideologies over the heart of the Indian nation.

As a function of nationalist discourse, the Wagah border ceremony is a complicated, multi-textual performance, all supported by music and chanting that reflect both a history of the battles for sovereignty and the artifice of contemporary cultural

identity. At the forefront of the festivities are performances of nationalist symbols, inviting all in attendance to participate by adding their voices and bodies to the ritual. Hearing “Vande Mataram” chanted at the Wagah border provoked a range of questions about contemporary Indian cultural nationalism: What is the political history underlying the use of the motherland metaphor in nationalist performances? What is the role of gender in the construction of India’s national consciousness? What is the meaning, utility, and potency of “Vande Mataram” and the concept of the motherland for different cross sections of Indian society? In order to explain the full scope of this song’s political power, I explore early constructions of motherland symbolism in South Asia.

The Origins of and Contentions over the Idea of the Motherland

The history of a gendered association with the land in South Asia easily predates the encounter with the West. The city of Kolkata and the surrounding riverside territory that became consolidated into the colonial capital are closely associated with the feminine power of the mother-goddess Durga and her fierce avatar, Kali. From my conversations with scholars around Kolkata, speculation emerged that the roots of mother-goddess worship come from adivasi (tribal) cultures that predate Hinduism. Kali’s association with Kolkata dates from ancient times (Barbiani 2005), where amid the fetid and fertile swampland of the Hooghly Delta the most prominent precolonial presence was and still is the infamous Kalighat. This temple, the city of Kolkata, and the Indian province of Bengal as a whole are maintained as a bastion of Hindu religion, especially the Kali-worshipping Shakta sect, and is a focal point for the associations between nationalism and a spiritual understanding of the motherland. There are countless Bengali poems and songs that invoke mataram, promoting a strong identification between indigenous culture and the land. It is then not out of the ordinary that the author of “Vande Mataram,” Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, used motherland symbolism to infuse his prose with nativist sentiment.

A divine feminine association with the land structures a common nativist perspective as the child of the goddess, juxtaposed against foreign cultures and religions whose encroachment was often construed as crimes against the soil. These metaphors endured because of the damage that colonial agrarian schemes had on the population and the land. The terrible famine of the 1770s in Bengal became the setting of Chattopadhyay’s novel *Anandamath*, framing colonial activity in India as violence against the motherland. The politicization of female-gendered association with the South Asian homeland was even more pronounced in relation to the Western perspective. Jasodhara Bagchi writes:

[T]he masculine Occident conceived the Orient as a feminine image. Ironically the nationalists conceived their own country as the great mother figure in keeping with the sanction derived from the religious practices of Hindu Bengal. This helped to Hindu-ise the tone of nationalism in Bengal. By representing the country as a Hindu mother/goddess the nationalist culture helped to inject a significant order into the struggle to rejoin what is intimately and unmistakably one’s own. (1990, 67)

The motherland symbol appealed to the Hindu majority across classes and castes during the independence movement because it represented both a pure Indian femininity and a divine force ensuring emancipation and sovereignty for all sons of the soil.

Published during the height of the Bengali renaissance in the nineteenth century, *Anandamath*, considered the first Indian novel, had the added effect of imbuing the modern sense of nation with the sacred qualities of a Hindu goddess. The plot promotes violence and sacrifice for the protection of the motherland through the depiction of a holy war fought by an army of indigenous ascetics against the monstrous, colonial oppressors of South Asia. Chattopadhyay harnessed the passion of the 1857 mutiny, often described as one of India's wars for independence, and placed it into a narrative of morality designed to idolize the nation. This construction was extremely successful in reconfiguring traditional Hindu gender roles and imprinting a mantra of national identity, "Vande Mataram," in the minds of all the diverse cultures of South Asia that considered themselves indigenous.

Written in *śadhu bhaśa*, the older Bengali dialect, much closer to Sanskrit than today's *calit* form, the influence of *Anandamath* and its feature song is undeniable in the movement opposing the British partition of Bengal in 1906. "Vande Mataram" rose to prominence during this time as the rallying cry against foreigners and non-Hindus, becoming a hallmark of the *swadeshi*, or "self-rule," campaigns that spread across the subcontinent. Since its entrance into the politics of the independence movement, "Vande Mataram" continues to be deployed against the foreign other at Wagah's daily border defense rituals and has been deployed during numerous episodes of aggression with Pakistan and against China in the 1960s (Mohanty 2004, 70). "Vande Mataram" became closely associated with the violent elements of the independence movement, prompting many Indian leaders to reevaluate the musical composition that had become a national slogan.

The renowned Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore performed the song at the 1896 session of the Indian National Congress, since *mataram* was initially considered a "symbol that helped to bridge the social, religious and political domain of colonial society" (Bagchi 1990, 66). Tagore would soon have a change of heart, arguing against its nomination as India's national anthem because he saw it as divisive for a secular vision of the nation. The explicit connection between Indian soil and the Hindu religion, and the novel and song's violent rhetoric, excluded non-Hindus as part of the nationalist project against British dominance. Additionally, it placed the modern Hindu woman at the center of representing and preserving tradition, a point expressed eloquently in Tagore's ([1916] 2004) celebrated novel *Ghare-Baire* (*The home and the world*). Tagore's nuanced and carefully directed assault on *swadeshi*'s politics of difference in *Ghare-Baire* addresses gender through the development of the idealized, but conflicted, housewife Bimala. As Nidhi Varma (2013) observes,

Tagore represents Bimala in *Ghare-Baire* with a very specific purpose—to discredit Sandip's brand of nationalism. His approach nevertheless throws up an interesting corollary. Was Tagore also telling us how the nationalist project is and always will inherently erase issues central to women? Are nationalism and gender empowerment intrinsically antithetical?

As women are symbolically glorified by the motherland symbol, functionally, just as Tagore weaves them in his novel, they are not empowered. As I demonstrate later, this is borne out in the continuous remakes of “Vande Mataram” and in the politics of the Wagah border ceremony, where nationalism overshadows patriarchy by constructing the “nightmare” of the other.

While Tagore employs the motherland metaphor in much of his work, his criticism of the violent swadeshi nationalism was controversial within the highly charged political environment of the early twentieth century. Viewing nationalism as a product of a global capitalist framework, Tagore writes, “[T]he national machinery of commerce and politics turns out neatly compressed bales of humanity which have their use and high market value; but they are bound in iron hoops, labeled and separated off with scientific care and precision” (1917, 6). Tagore’s insights were developed in light of his travels throughout Asia, where he witnessed firsthand the development of numerous national identities through the ideology of modernization. Even as Tagore’s artistic output became central to South Asian cultural consciousness, such as the national anthems of both India (“Jana Gana Mana”) and Bangladesh (“Amar Śonar Bangla”), he questioned whether nationalism could ever situate itself in a non-hegemonic framework. In the drive toward the modern nationstate, South Asian cultures experienced a reconfiguration of values set forth by dominant political forces, where elites and ideologues competed and collaborated toward enabling their vision of sovereignty. The following discussion explores this theme with attention to how gender roles were put into the service of constructing the Indian nation.

India’s Postcolonial Nationalism: Tradition, Modernity, and Gender

In a challenge to Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation, Partha Chatterjee (1989, 1993, 2006) has examined the construction of anti-colonial nationalism, and asks, “What do they have left to imagine? [W]ho is doing the imagining?” (1993, 6). Chatterjee describes Indian nationalism as bifurcated into senses of inner and outer, in response to the colonial paradigm (ibid., 3–6). In this construction, the inner consists of the spiritual, local representations of traditional culture, while the outer consists of material, global, modern, and technological representations. India’s secularization plays a balancing act between these two streams, allowing expressions within the spiritual domain while also projecting a modern capitalist economy and rationalism globally. This division between tradition and modernity also takes on a gendered dimension, where Indian women are both privileged and burdened by representing the traditional, the pure, and the sacred elements of Indian culture. As Chatterjee notes, “[S]ince the spiritual domain was the weapon in the hands of the nationalist, the glorification of motherhood was the double refined spirituality that was used as a major mode of representation by the Bengali nationalists” (1989, 249). The task of forging a new Indian identity was largely dominated by elite Bengalis, who implemented a variety of tactics to steer cultural output, including literature and propaganda for a reformed understanding of gender roles, to unify South Asians against the colonial threat.

The gender-defined burden of representing the motherland produced numerous oppressive social dynamics. For example, Chatterjee points to the ridicule cosmopolitan Bengali women have faced, as well as the social orientations that have attached tradition

and the nation onto women's bodies. The trappings of cosmopolitanism were regarded as immoral, and the perceived decadence of the Western woman was rejected in favor of an ascetic image of the chaste Hindu woman. The novel *Anandamath* explicitly glorifies this role of the pure Hindu woman, whose sacrifice and chastity are crucial to the nation's survival. In this way, the literati "attempted to define social and moral principles for locating the position of women in the 'modern' world of the nation" (Chatterjee 1989, 625). Perpetuated through popular culture and nationalist ritual, traditional gender roles become symbols of virtue and morally correct expressions of national pride.

These hegemonic structures within Indian society also did their work to influence the performing arts. Through the lens of Antonio Gramsci's "cultural hegemony" and Edward Said's "orientalism," Chakravorty observes how those in power inculcate their ideals into the cultures where they exert influence—in this case—molding performing arts traditions to their vision (1998, 108). The patriarchal nationalism that stems from the associations between the land, women, and religion influenced the codification of modern Indian art forms like music (Bakhle 2005; Subramanian 2006; Weidman 2006), dance (Allen 1997), and literature, but profoundly influenced the symbolic meaning of being a Hindu woman in colonial South Asia. The active role of Indian women in today's nationalistic displays is directly connected to the political and conjugal dynamics born of the colonial encounter with the British, whose Victorian values had a strong effect on the elites in Indian culture.

In *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, Tanika Sarkar (2001) examines Indian cultural nationalism through a literary and historical lens and shows that the indigenous elite, faced with colonial oppression at the political, economic, and cultural levels, turned inward to the domain of the familial as the last area where they could exert power. Sarkar writes, "If an alien, imposed modernity was represented as a series of deprivations, then nationalism could situate its emancipatory project only by enclosing a space that was still understood as inviolate, autonomous" (ibid., 26), the domestic realm. The influence of colonial morality and education contributed to nineteenth-century social movements, whose reform efforts produced the abolition of sati, widow immolation, and other political contentions that focused on gender roles as the site on which to construct a new nationalism. Sarkar continues, "[T]he sati was an adored nationalist symbol, her figure representing the moment of climax in expositions of Hindu nationalism. Bankim Chandra saw in it the last hope of a doomed nation" (42). From here, Sarkar places the idealized Hindu woman at the crux of India's cultural nationalism, offering a scathing critique of *Anandamath* and its constructions of gender and morality.

Nineteenth-century social movements in India reinforced notions of tradition and modernity in which women were often caught in the middle. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Gayatri Spivak famously noted how the colonial engagement with sati was broadly construed as "white men saving brown women from brown men" (1993, 93) and how these women were ultimately pawns in a struggle between British and indigenous patriarchy. Following Benedict Anderson (1983), we can point to these gender-focused social movements and their spread through print technology as the initial imaginings of India as a nation. Yet this imagining was done over the ashes of voiceless Hindu women. In this hegemony, empowered male intellectuals were able to imagine their nation using populist narratives and patriarchal symbols to penetrate deeply into the cultural identity of subordinate classes.

Indian Secularism and the Influence of Anandamath

By constructing a sense of the secular with Hindu overtones, the Indian state replicates a ritual described in Anandamath that calls for the renunciation of spiritual difference in order to focus the energies of devotion into a more visceral, familial connection to the soil. Chattopadhyay writes, “Do you both renounce your castes? For all Children belong to the same caste. In our work, we do not differentiate between Hindu or Muslim, Buddhist or Sikh, Parsee or Pariah. We are brothers here—all Children of the same Mother India” (2005, 99). In agreement, the assembled warriors are initiated while singing “Vande Mataram.” This powerful narrative is ritually reenacted at the Wagah border ceremony on a daily basis, where the idea of motherland, while Hindu in origin, is central to India’s secular cultural nationalism by seeking to unify the participants under one banner.

Thus, Anandamath initiated the playing of the modern nation-building game in South Asia, in the form of a symbolic construction that Frantz Fanon called “literature of combat” (1963, 240), which promotes the idea of nation as something to be fought and sacrificed for and that subsequently creates a sacred aura around what will become national boundaries. In this way, the modern concept of the nation was given the trappings of nativist politics in order to coordinate a diverse population against a foreign enemy. Always insightful, Ashish Nandy notes that

colonialism creates a culture in which the ruled are constantly tempted to fight their rulers within the psychological limits set by the latter. It is not an accident that the specific variants of the concepts with which many anti-colonial movements in our times have worked have often been the products of the imperial culture itself and, even in opposition, these movements have paid homage to their respective cultural origins. (1983, 3)

Anandamath is a great example of this function, where indigenous literature takes on the trappings of not only the Western novel but also the Western ideology of the nation. In Hegelian terms, we find here a construction of the spirit of the nation whose deterministic trajectory toward freedom is reconfigured into the fulfillment of thinly veiled traditional roles and symbolically united with a Hindu sense of purity (Hegel and Sibree 1956). The sprawling and overwhelming political movement within India to incorporate women and the arts into the nationalist paradigm is intimately related to India’s drive to modernize and become a secular nation on its own terms.

The crux of this construction is how nationalists were able to fit ideas of sacred, and decidedly Hindu, spirituality into a secular and modern framework. Looking at Indian classical music, Janaki Bakhle points to this function of religious ideas being subsumed into secular endeavors in order to bring minority voices to an equal place in a national dialogue (2008, 277). I question whether this has been the case with the symbol of the Indian motherland. When Indian women dance on the path toward the Pakistani border, are they not participating in a ritual of “othering,” positioning their sense of freedom against those women on the other side? While this experience is communicated as positive and liberating, their role is one that has been mediated

historically by patriarchal-cum-nationalist controls. Has the unequal place Indian women have in Indian society been masked by the juxtaposition with Pakistan's expression of gender roles? In this view, their greater freedom is relative to that of Pakistani women on the other side of the border rather than a reflection of their agency and empowerment within their own culture. As postcolonial authors work to deconstruct the damage of Western historiography, Indian nationalist symbolism, and the hegemonic imagining of national identity, India's unique form of pro-deist secularism continues to be positioned against Pakistan's religiosity, obscuring the roots of gender inequality.

With the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Parishad (BJP) political party in the 1990s, Hindu fundamentalism is becoming part of the mainstream popular culture of India. There are numerous overt expressions of aggression toward gender-focused human rights equated with political secularism, manifesting in what some refer to as the "saffron terror," or Hindu fundamentalist violence. Overshadowing gender, caste, and class problems, right-wing ideologies in India are stoked by confrontations with Pakistan, making it increasingly difficult to remove religion from the center of national identity. With secularism becoming almost an epithet in the past few years of Indian national politics, new productions of "Vande Mataram" have become immensely popular, forming an integral part of a modern Hindu golden age.

"Vande Mataram" in the Golden Age of Hinduism

While pondering these issues, I propitiously encountered "Vande Mataram" in a variety of political, literary, musical, and devotional contexts during my 2011 residency in Kolkata. Having decided to learn Bengali to further my studies, I chose to explore national song in a literature section of an American Institute of Indian Studies language program. Through these sessions, I sought out productions of "Vande Mataram," including A. R. Rahman's (1997) celebrated album commemorating 50 years of independence. I also found a popular version sung by Lata Mangeshkar, with music by Ranjit Barot, set to a video directed by Bala and Kanika in 1998.² The rather bellicose video is full of marching, horseback riding, and hoisting of the flag in a variety of terrains. This version also includes subtitles that describe India's population as "700 million below the age of thirty," followed by "and home to 150 million peaceful Muslims," effectively excluding them from their rightful constituency as Indians and categorizing them as pacified others residing within. The comments section of this video erases any doubt that this composition is still viewed as a Hindu nationalist song, which many stated should be the national anthem of India.

Early that August, I was invited to a CD release party of producer and tabla maestro Bikram Ghosh (2012), whose newly produced version of "Vande Mataram" was to be broadcast nationally, preceding the prime minister's speech on Independence Day. This new rendition boasts more than 20 master musicians of different backgrounds in a highly stylized eight-minute video that pans through scenes of diverse cross sections of Indian culture. Ghosh's version includes few lyrics beyond the title phrase, yet it fills the narrative with regular instrumental interpolations featuring instruments that represent India's traditional and modern musical constituency. Also prominent is a young girl who meanders through all the scenes looking rather forlorn, as she frequently glances down at her forearm, where in Devanagari script is tattooed the phrase vande mataram.

What inspired such an image of this sad girl, branded with this nationalist mantra? This imagery conjures theories regarding identity construction put forward by Stuart Hall (Hall and Du 1996), who argues that identification is constantly mediated, shifting and interacting, yet holds basic foundations at the level of the physical body. This baseline self at birth is modified through time and in social contexts by adopting symbolic associations, where Hall uses Heath's notion of "suture" (Heath 1981, 76) to describe the process of attachment to newly encountered ideas about the self. This young girl represents a similar function, where the responsibilities accorded to women through their biology comes from a tradition steeped in the patriarchal worship of a mother-goddess-as-nation entwined with anticolonial politics. Notions of Hindu purity underlie the image, where the innocent and helpless motherland must be protected from the pollution of the other. Ghosh's video presents no other, but the girl's melancholy expresses an existential dilemma where she must resign herself to her fate as a symbol of Indian tradition under the gaze of dotting onlookers. The observers visually represent a diverse range of religious and ethnic backgrounds, all following this girl, who looks very little like any of them due to her Caucasian complexion. My essentializing ethnicity notwithstanding, I found it strange, and perhaps a little ironic, that this idealized representative of new India expressed no joy over her position as the object of adoration. Her followers gathered around her, much like the pledge of fealty from Anandamath described previously, do little but offer warm smiles of support as a single tear runs down her face. The expression of emotion is perhaps intended to be a sense of pride and strength as in other patriotic songs, which effectively subordinates ethnicity, culture, and gender disparities to the spirit of the nation.

For more than 125 years, "Vande Mataram" has been one of the world's most recognized songs. It is generally performed in raag desh, a raga whose character is closely associated with national pride and common in other patriotic music. Ghosh's new version follows suit, yet it seems to create a new meaning for the phrase, one of secularism and modernity, and even advertisement—when flashes of graffiti-style writing proclaim "India is cool!" and "India is fun!" Images in the video promote Indian culture as a rich cultural tapestry, populated with characters representing Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and other religious persuasions as well as traditional and modern signifiers both visual and sonic. "Vande Mataram" seems to have evolved by virtue of this project into a secular, all-inclusive, and joyous slogan of a new India. Unfortunately, the image of this young girl revives some damaging symbolism, promoting the notion that the female body remains the site at which the nation is established and maintained. Additionally, "Vande Mataram" contains implicit Hindu overtones that despite redaction, remain part of cultural memory. The recent protests in the United States over the national anthem pose similar questions: Can music be stripped of its meanings when its origins are controversial or offensive? Can nationalism justify such epistemological damage? What do we do with national symbols or expressions that no longer represent their constituency?

Long before Ghosh's remake, "Vande Mataram" and various portions of the song's extensive lyrics had been repeated across India, fostering a close relationship between nationalism and a tradition of Hindu devotionism (Bhattacharya 2003). As normative visions of Indian identity have changed over the period of modernization, along with the development of cosmopolitan cultural formations and state-sponsored

secularization, so has the mainstream meaning of the song. It has been systematically molded while facing periodic resistance from many groups across India (ibid., 42). As a result, “Vande Mataram” is still wildly popular and is heard in a variety of contexts, often instrumental, or severely redacted. Following are the complete lyrics of “Vande Mataram,” translated into English by Sri Aurobindo Bhose (1999, 465–66):

Mother, I bow to thee!
Rich with thy hurrying streams,
Bright with orchard gleams, cool with thy winds of delight,
Dark fields waving Mother of might,
Mother free.
Glory of moonlight dreams,
Over thy branches and lordly streams, Clad in thy blossoming trees,
Mother, giver of ease
Laughing low and sweet!
Mother I kiss thy feet,
Speaker sweet and low!
Mother, to thee I bow.

Who hath said thou art weak in thy lands
When the sword flesh out in the seventy million hands
And seventy million voices roar
Thy dreadful name from shore to shore?
With many strengths who art mighty and stored,
To thee I call Mother and Lord!
Though who savest, arise and save!
To her I cry who ever her foreman drove
Back from plain and sea
And shook herself free.

Thou art wisdom, thou art law,
Thou art heart, our soul, our breath
Though art love divine, the awe
In our hearts that conquers death.
Thine the strength that nerves the arm,
Thine the beauty, thine the charm.
Every image made divine
In our temples is but thine.

Thou art Durga, Lady and Queen,
With her hands that strike and her swords of sheen,
Thou art Lakshmi lotus-throned,
And the Muse a hundred-toned,
Pure and perfect without peer,
Mother lend thine ear,
Rich with thy hurrying streams,

Bright with thy orchard gleems,
Dark of hue O candid-fair

In thy soul, with jeweled hair
And thy glorious smile divine,
Loveliest of all earthly lands,
Showering wealth from well-stored hands!
Mother, mother mine!
Mother sweet, I bow to thee,
Mother great and free!

Rich with naturalistic metaphors, the song explicitly carries the sentiment of anticolonial militarism in the second stanza and of devotion to Hindu mother-goddess archetypes in the fourth stanza. As stated previously, the sense of indigeneity and connection to the land was immediately embraced as the ideal national song by Hindu elites, but it eventually proved a divisive and controversial composition for non-Hindus. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (2000, 32) details the numerous political debates where the song competed with and lost to Rabindranath Tagore's "Jana Gana Mana" for the honor of becoming India's national anthem. "Vande Mataram" was nevertheless dubbed India's national song and became widespread at nationalist gatherings and anticolonial rallies. It was eventually truncated in 1950 to exclude all but the first two stanzas, assuming that—much like Ghosh's video—its sentiment can be altered and stripped of overt Hinduness.

The impulse to secularize the song has been met with resistance by rightwing Hindutva groups who regard it as crucial to fostering a Hindu-normative national consciousness. Campaigns since independence and as recent as 2006 have attempted to mandate the song in all public schools, resulting in a number of protests.³ BJP politicians and many Hindu nationalists have called for mandatory recitation, even in madrassas, as a measure of fealty to the Indian state.⁴ Conservative Hindutva websites and publications still call for its performance, in toto, at all national events.⁵ Conversely, numerous groups of Indian Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and others oppose and resent the performance of "Vande Mataram," especially as their national song.⁶ Much of this resistance comes from the explicit crafting of the nation as an idol to be worshipped, contradicting the religious tenets of many Indians, but more specifically, "Vande Mataram" as a national song implicitly alienates non-Hindus from inclusion into the nation.

National songs and anthems express the values of independence movements, and the choice of which songs represent the nation inevitably prioritizes some revolutionary ideologies over others. The lyrics of such compositions create symbolic references not only to the struggles for sovereignty but also to cultural dynamics couched in that struggle. In the case of India, both violent and nonviolent movements for independence had their own literary voices. Bankim Chandra's *Anandamath* and "Vande Mataram" represented not only a violent solution but one that infused Hinduism into a supposedly secular national ideology while simultaneously placing gender at the forefront of imagining the new Indian nation. New versions of the composition continue making attempts to alter the meaning of the song to be more inclusive, more modern, or more secular, yet these efforts have altered little of its original ideology to subordinate

marginalized identities to the nationalist cause and center Hinduism at the heart of Indian national culture.

Conclusion

I return to my position as an outsider, imposing a structure of knowing that is hopefully illuminating. My arguments attempt to demystify the social and political ramifications of India's unique secularization process, while also addressing the symbol of the motherland from a feminist perspective. Yet perhaps, as some scholars have noted (Kishwar 2004; Mohanty 1984), these arguments are too Western and homogeneous to hold currency at all levels of Indian society. The imposition of a monolithic feminism on South Asian contexts forces categories that do not necessarily align with the diversity of gender, caste, and cultural realities. Ideas about sacrifice and purity pose difficult questions about women's rights to agency and self-representation, especially to the eyes of an outsider. However, it is difficult for me to see the historical deployment of this symbolism as other than a patriarchal imposition to reinforce a male-dominated sense of the Indian self. The genealogy of the mataram symbol, while ancient in origin, shows a marked change during the colonial period, manipulated by literati for their own ideological aims. Women were exploited socially and symbolically by elites to propel the nationalist imperative and to inspire people across South Asia to defend what they saw as their soil, their women, and ultimately, their sovereignty.

Culture always battles over the ownership of symbols, along with different avenues of mass media and through means of transmission that are both archival and reportorial. Whereas embodiment is both a way of knowing and a way of creating knowledge, the embodiment of symbols is not always a conscious choice but one often branded onto bodies by society. "Vande Mataram" is a powerful symbol that will continue being uttered with great passion. Yet it is a "hail" to an idea far removed from the stewardship of the soil and the empowerment of women in India. It is the call of a nationalist seeking to create difference by drawing lines in the sand and convincing others that such a line is more important than what happens to the people on either side.

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Notes

1 The Golden Temple is the most holy place of the Sikh religion and the site of a massacre by government troops in 1984 called Operation Blue Star, which killed many hundreds of people in an effort to regain control of the Harmandir Complex in Amritsar, Punjab.

2 "Vande Mataram," sung by Lata Mangeshkar, 1998, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACmGXktTxco> (accessed October 25, 2016).

3 For information on the "Vande Mataram" controversy, see Shamsul Islam, "The History and Politics of Vande Mataram," *Milli Gazette*, September 11, 2006, <http://>

www.milligazette.com/dailyupdate/2006/20060911_india_communalism_vande.htm; Ram Puniyani, "Song for the Nation—Vande Mataram Controversy," *Counter currents.org*, August 31, 2006, <https://www.countercurrents.org/comm-puniyani310806.htm>; "Row Builds over Vande Mataram: The Asian Age," *Z News*, August 21, 2006, http://zeenews.india.com/home/row-builds-over-vande-mataram-the-asian-age_316885.html (all accessed October 25, 2016).

4 Mohua Chatterjee, "BJP Makes Madrassas Sing 'Vande Mataram,'" *Times of India*, August 29, 2006, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/BJP-makes-madrassas-sing-Vande-Mataram/articleshow/1933566.cms>; Hindu Nationalist Blog stating that "Indians who do not want to sing Vande Mataram should go to Pakistan," *Twenty-First Century India* (blog), <http://21centuryindia.blogspot.hk/2006/08/those-who-do-not-want-to-sing-vande.html> (both accessed October 25, 2016).

5 "Vande Mataram: The National Song of India," Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, 2014, <http://www.hindujagruti.org/activities/campaigns/national/vandemataram/> (accessed October 25, 2016).

6 For public response from Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu communities, see "Vande Mataram Explained," *Everything.Explained.Today*, http://everything.explained.today/Vande_Mataram/; "Muslim Body Supports Fatwa against Recitation of Vande Mataram," *Rediff News*, November 3, 2009, <http://news.rediff.com/report/2009/nov/03/muslim-body-supports-fatwa-against-vande-mataram-recitation.htm> (both accessed October 25, 2016).

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