

Art and Trans Literature: Iconoclastic Representation of the Freedom Movement in Colonial India

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Abstract

The metamorphic process of creating arts and literature by going 'beyond appearance' and tradition, and shaping the artist's or writer's feelings in lineal or scriptural forms is adapted since the Palaeolithic age when human beings imagined a stone or a tree as a form of the Almighty. This polytheistic perception and presentation of the artist's imagination with the aim of articulating functional aesthetics and translating traditional perceptions into a novel paradigm had been prevalent during the freedom movement of colonial India as exemplified in reimagining Bharat Mata as goddess Durga or presenting the Goddess of India in different forms, parodying the popular myth of Yoshoda's milking from a cow for Krishna as Bharat Mata milking from the 'all providing cow' and distributing it to all the citizens irrespective of their religious identity, angelic representation of Mahatma Gandhi, the edification of India's struggle for freedom as the epic battle between Ram and Ravana, and transformation of the martyrs as the sons of Bharat Mata. So, this paper aims to show how popular art during India's freedom movement made anti-colonial march with the transcendental depiction of Indian animals and the freedom fighters as religious icons of Hinduism.

Keywords: Iconoclasm, Trans literature, Popular art, Freedom Movement, India

The transcendental envisioning of the physical world according to the worshipper-artist's own perception has been crucial in manifesting the invisible in visible forms and creating icons of the Invisible in both the natural world in the forms of trees, stones, water, etc., and also in the forms of a human and a non-human animal. This 'divine intelligence' of developing ideas into iconic forms has motivated human beings to develop polytheism as practiced in ancient Greece as well the ancient and present India. But, the development of monotheism practiced specifically by the Abrahamic religions, and the advent of their practitioners throughout the world have mitigated the polytheistic perception of the world with the aim of achieving physical power as supported by Sigmund Freud in uttering "Religious intolerance, which was foreign to antiquity before this and for long after, was inevitably born with the belief in one God" (Freud 35).

This war of “God Against the Gods” has been crucial for Islamic invaders to diminish the temples of Hindu gods and metamorphosing them into the mosques in India as can be exemplified with the building of Qubbat al-Islam or Quwwat al-Islam in 1192 AD, the first mosque in Delhi, after demolishing the temple built by Prithvi Raj Chauhan (1166-1192AD) as it is still evident with the ‘Iron Pillar’ on the site; or the reconstruction of the mosque of Benares by Alamgir on the site of the Bisheshwar Temple (Goel 13), and to break down the images of Hindu Gods as found in the demolish of the images of MārtaNDA, Vishaya, Î’āna, Chakravaratî and Tripure’vara’ by Sikandar Butshikan of Kashmir (1389-1413 AD) or in the description of religious intolerance practiced by Ghazni who, as documented by Jinaprabhasuri (1261-1333), leader of the Kharatara Gaccha branch of the Shwetambar Jains, in his Vividitirthakalpa (1333), “on his return journey after plundering Gujara (Gujarat), tried to demolish the icon of Mahavira instated at the beautiful temple of Jina” (Jain 4) to name a few. Besides diminishing the glorified history of Hinduism, the Muslim invaders have made it established that “Glory be to Allah who has given us the faith of Islam that in this reign of the destroyer of false gods” (Goel 78). The reflection of this religious transition is found in the medieval Indian coins with their calligraphy and geometrical designs in place of the depiction of gods and goddesses and animal figures found in the coins of ancient India; in Islamic painting produced in the Mohammedan period of the imperialised India.

This religious imperialism of Islam was followed by the European invaders in establishing Christian churches and missionaries and converting the Indians to Christianity with the baits of riches though “Islam commended itself to the Indian intellect as a more congenial faith than Christianity” (Lane-Poole 4). The proclamation of India by the Christian invaders of Europe “in the name of [my] Lord and master Jesus Christ” (Cox 23) with the establishment of Christian missionaries, propagation of the Gospel, preaching of the Holy Scriptures, growing the number of Indian Christians culminated with the negative explanation of the traditional religious practices of Hinduism as found in William Ward’s description of Hinduism as ‘vicious’ in opposition to the ‘virtuous’ Christianity. Ward’s debasing of the Puranas as filthy and the Laws of Manu filled with adultery, stealing, lying, trivialization of the Vedas, derogation of Hindu polytheism as the culmination of ‘fancies of men’ and extolling of Christianity as the source of ‘the highest knowledge of Divine Nature’ (Sugirtharaj, 78) in his *A View of the History, Literature, and Mythology of the Hindoos* (1820) go hand in hand with William Jones’ description of Hinduism as an “erroneous religion” and finding the importance of sacred texts of the Hindus ‘not so much for their own merits as for their validation of Christianity’ (Sugirtharaj 6), and Max Muller’s occidental comment on the Vedic hymns that ‘represent the lowest stratum in the growth of the human mind’ and as the ‘first stammering of a child’ repudiated the Hinduism for Christian reinforcement. This negation of Hinduism “acts as a kind of provisional erasure, clearing a space for the expansion of the colonial imagination and for the pursuit of desire” (Spurr 93) and made most new elite Indians like Keshub Chandra Sen, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rammohan Roy see the British rule as “Divine Providence and therefore beneficial both for the colonizer and the colonized” (Sugirtharaj 55). This promotion of a ‘Christian Company’ with the propagation of Western values as a colonial agenda made the Bible synonymous with a gun. This Eurocentric proliferation of the Christian Cross as a sword, and the Christian colonizers as sword bearers of modernism and civilization in contrast with the aimless, vagrant colonized of India is exemplified in novels like Rudyard

Kipling's *Kim*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary: An Indian Tale* (1811) where the male protagonist Hilarion efforts hard to convert the female protagonist Luxima, an allusion to the Hindu goddess Laxmi, into Christianity as well as in the iconoclastic representations of Queen Victoria in cartoon art named "The Accession of the Queen of India" (1858) (Fig.1) published after the British victory of the Great Rebellion in 1857, or in the presentation of British officers as forbearers of knowledge and civilization and the brown Indians as derogatory servants of them (Fig.2) or as snake charmers (Fig. 3) or the half naked figures of religious gurus (Fig.4) in the paintings of Charles D'Oyly following the idea Eurocentric idea of the 'Orientalism' which is "nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths" (Said 6); or in the lithography produced by the newly founded art schools in India based on European patterns as found in the presentation of Parasu Rama Avatara as an uncivilized man attacking a British official with traditional weapons (Fig. 5) indicating the criminalization of the tribes in India by the British colonizers for their anti-colonial movements.

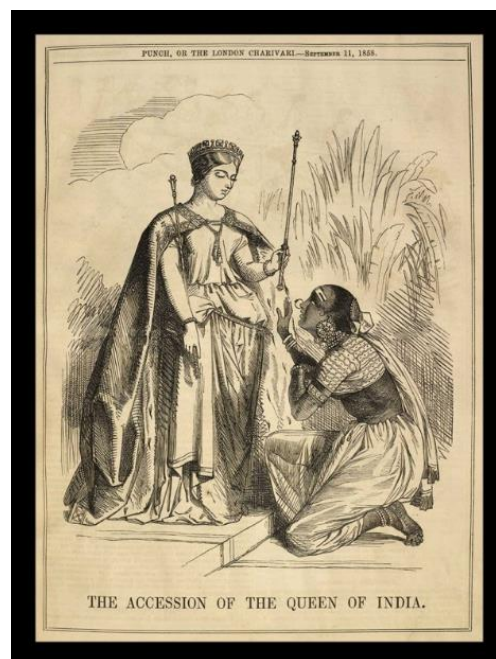


Fig. 1: "The Accession of the Queen of India" © Punch

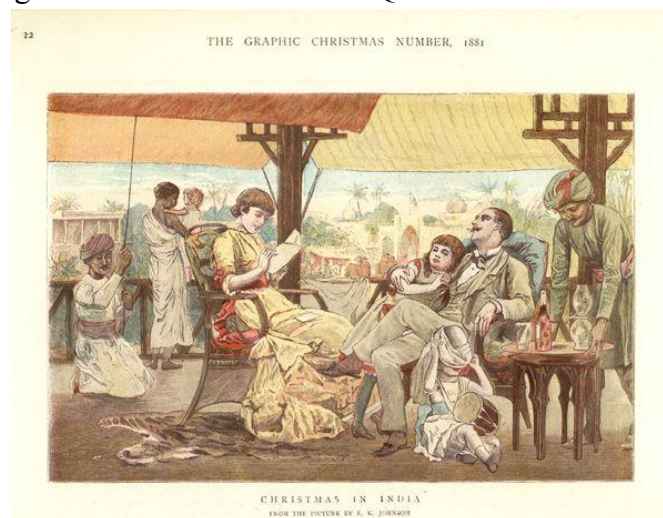


Fig. 2: "Christmas in India" by E K Garden (1881) © Yesu Garden

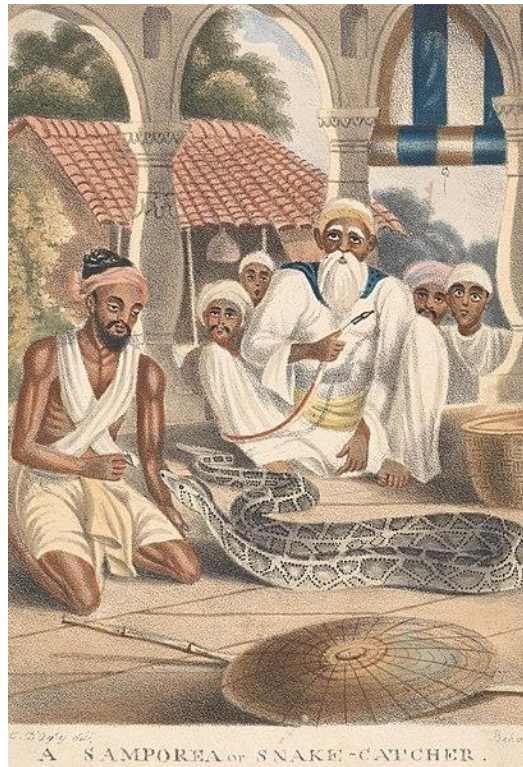


Fig. 3: “A Samporea or Snake Catcher” by Charles D'Oyly © Wikimedia Commons

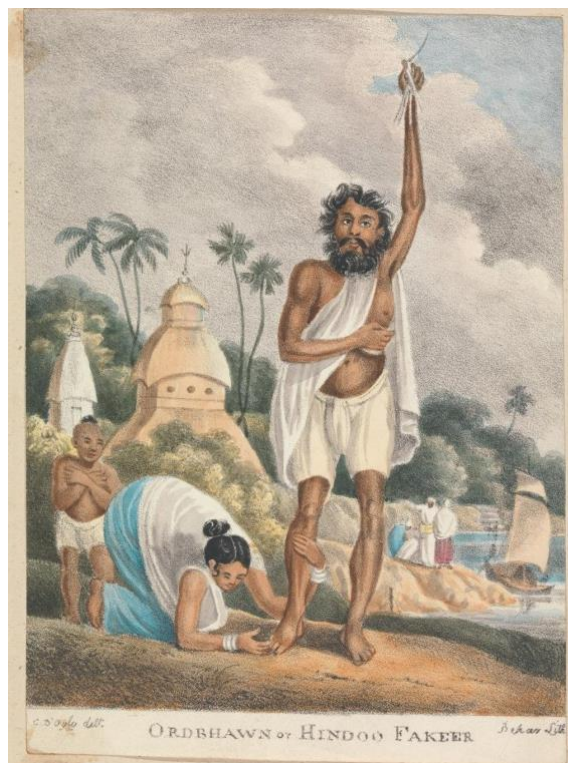


Fig. 4: “Ordbhawn or Hindoo Fakeer” by Charles D'Oyly © Wikimedia Commons



Fig. 5: “Parasu Rama Avatara” (1880) by Kristohury Das © Neumayer & Schelberger

This exaltation of ‘cultural arrogance’ in the form of negating Hinduism and the Hindus on one hand and promoting Christianity and the Christian Europeans has been defended by the Indian artists, known and unknown, to heighten the Hindu deities and glorify the iconoclasm of the freedom fighters of India creating an anti-colonial ‘visual turn’ (Neumayer & Schelberger vii). The religious nationalism began with the attribution of India as “a geographic entity and as a somatic being embodied in the figure of Bharat Mata, Mother India” who had been abused repeatedly by the patriarchal foreign invaders like the British, and mystifying the Bharat Mata not only as a fervent saviour but also as the destroyer of the evil colonial power. The allegorical representation of Bharat Mata as Yosoda, the mother of Lord Krishna, milking from ‘the wish-fulfilling cow, a metaphor for Congress whose followers were as ‘violent villains’ (Chandra 136) and also sharing some of the plenty to Britannia as exhibited in “A Wholesome Diet” (Fig. 6), a cartoon figure published in the Hindi Punch in January 1889, is “arguably an element of mockery and subversion in *painting back* in response to the colonizing power” (Ramaswamy 63) and the represented supremacy of Britannia by the British imperialists.



Fig.6: “A wholesome diet” (1889) © *The Hindi Punch*

Again, the divine stature of Bharat Mata (Fig. 7) holding sheaves of paddy, a piece of white cloth, a book, and a rosary in her four hands epitomizing *anna* (food), *bastra* (cloth), *siksha* (education), and *diksha* (initiation for spirituality) as pictured by Abanindranath Tagore to support the Swadeshi movement is an indication of self-sufficient India as a nation in opposition to the idolatry presentation of the British and the Britannia.



Fig.7: “Bharat Mata” (1905) by Abanindranath Tagore © Wiki Commons

The metamorphic exhibition of Bharat Mata as a goddess mother who takes care of or empowers her ‘sons’ like fighting against the imperial British was also seen in the popular arts like Sudhir Chowdhury’s “*Astra Dan* (Giving the Weapon)” (Fig.8) (1945) where goddess Durga, an epitome of Bharat Mata, is arming Subhash Chandra Bose for battling against the British, or in “Mahatma Gandhi on the lap of Bharat Mata” (Fig. 9) (1930) by Prabhu Dayal as according to Indian nationalist Bipin Chandra Pal,

Our history is the sacred biography of the Mother. Our philosophies are the revelations of the Mother’s mind. Our arts—our poetry and our painting, our music and our drama, our architecture and our sculpture, all these are the outflow of the Mother’s diverse emotional moods and experiences. (Bose 13)



Fig.8: © Neumayer & Schelberger (2008)

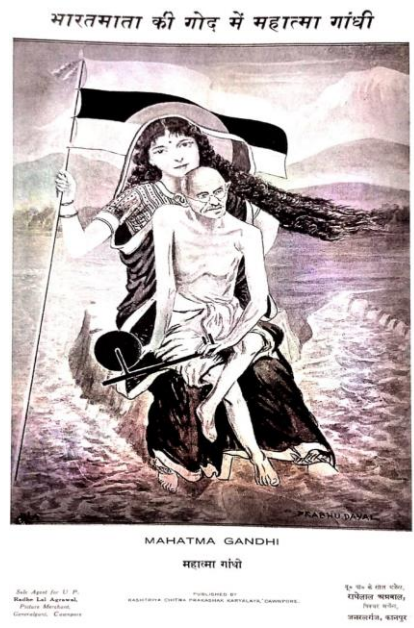


Fig.9: © Neumayer & Schelberger (2008)

Besides the iconoclasm of the imagined Bharat Mata, the real freedom fighters of colonial India were also worshipped as mortal gods not only unchaining the Bharat Mata from the captivity of the British but also realizing the ‘polycentricity of celestial power’ among regional leaders to battle against the monotheist superpower. To battle against the hailing of earlier colonisers like Christopher Columbus as a heavenly being an alternative religion was created by making man-gods and metaphorising the national leaders as different gods as “deification by official decree became a way to legitimize political power” (Subin 2021). The transfiguration of the nationalists is exemplified in the re-imagination of the great leaders of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 like Sri Bajirav Saheb Peshwa (Fig. 10), “brave as tiger handsome as a god” (Paul, 2017) as epitome of Kalki, (Fig. 11) the tenth *avatar* of Lord Vishnu riding a white horse and armed with a fiery sword, to cleanse the present colonial world and establish an era of righteousness.

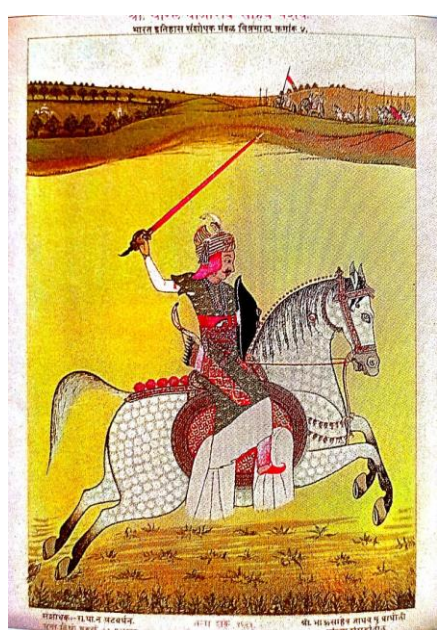


Fig.10: Peshwa Baji Rao (18th century) © Wiki Commons



Fig. 11: Kalki Avatara by Raja Ravi Varma (1910) © Wiki Commons

Again the divine recreation of Mahatma Gandhi in a contemporary bazaar art of the 1930s (Fig. 12) where Gandhi is embodied as Lord Siva, who is saving his disciple Bharat from the clutches of Yam Raj, the Vedic god of Death dressed as a British soldier, or in a lithograph named “Our Saviour” of 1940 (Fig. 13) created by R Ethirajah & Sons in 1940 where he is worshipped by the mortals in earth as well as by the *apsars* from heaven for becoming the saviour of the commons enhanced the ‘messianic transformation’ of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi into celestial Mahatma (Great Soul) as entitled by Rabindranath Tagore.

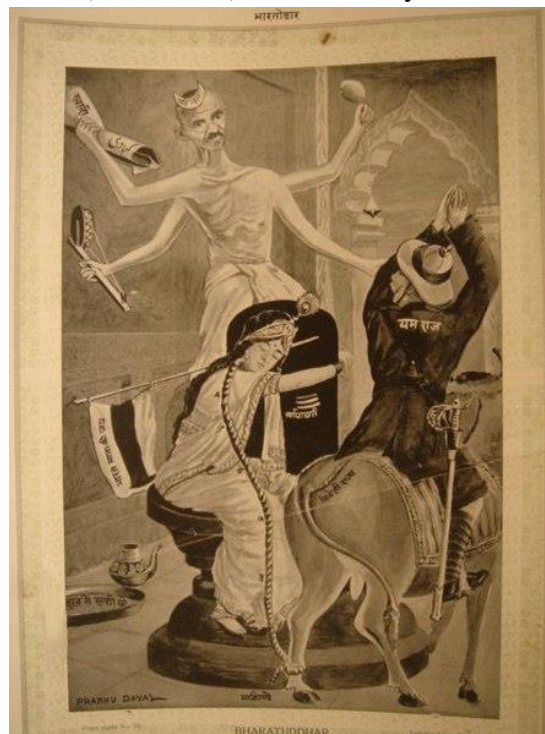


Fig.12 © Wiki Commons

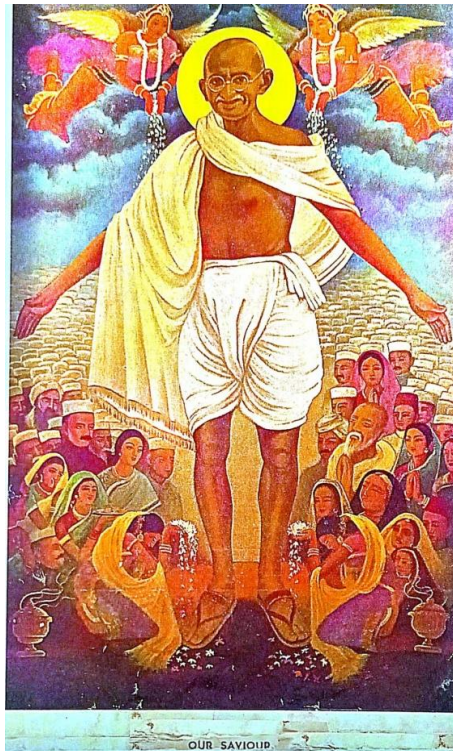


Fig.13 © Neumayer & Schelberger (2008)

This visual mystification of the mortal martyrs of the Nationalist Movement of India is also ascribed to other freedom fighters like Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose who is allegorised as the Chinnamasta, (Fig.14) a terrible form of Goddess Durga, signifying his ultimate sacrifice for India’s independence along with other martyrs. These kinds of idolization of the national heroes are the unsung or unknown artists’ “revisionary effort[s]” to “contest western representational authority, its regimes of vision and the gaze of the colonizers” (Neumann & Rippl 2-3).



Fig.14 © Neumayer & Schelberger (2008)

Like the representation of the freedom fighters as gods of Hinduism, the battle of theirs with the British for decolonizing the nation has also been visually compared with the battles narrated in the epics of India in contemporary arts as found in a painting entitled “Struggle for Freedom” (Fig.15), published by Shyam Sunder Lal Agarwal in 1930, where the struggle for India’s independence has been metaphorically presented as the epic battle between Lord Rama and Ravana. In this image, Gandhi and Nehru challenge the demon of British colonialism- while Gandhi holds his ‘weapons’ (spindle and charka), Nehru wields the mace of a boycott of foreign goods. Gandhi wears nothing more than a loincloth, while his adversary- the beast of colonialism- wears high boots and a uniform, and in his many hands can be seen the instruments of power and exploitation. There are, of course, the rifle and the sword, the shackles, the club, the gun, the army, the cavalry and the marines, the goal to imprison, and the medal to elevate. . . Like Sita in Ravana’s Lanka, Bharat Mata is held prisoner in the shadow of the assembly hall. (Neumayer & Schelberger 107)

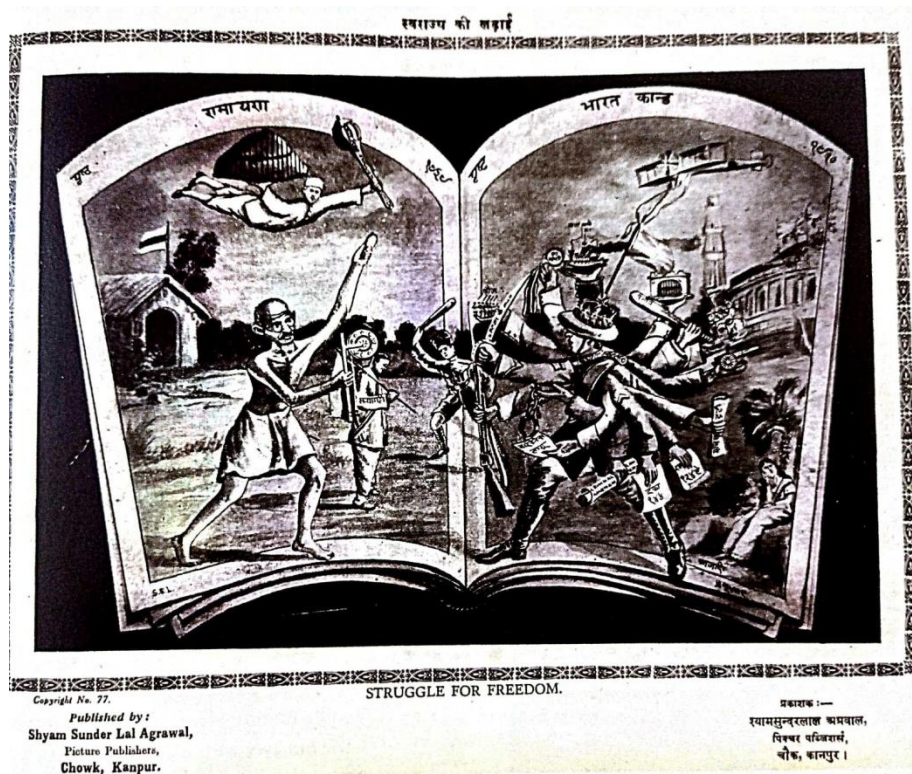


Fig.15 © Neumayer & Schelberger (2008)

Besides the religious iconoclasm of India’s freedom fighters and metaphorical resembling of India’s freedom movement with the epic battles narrated in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to combat the religious and anthropocentric imperialism practiced by the British colonizers, the supernatural visualization of the animals, particularly seen India, in the contemporary popular arts of the land, has accelerated India’s fight against the animal colonialism as the universal aspect of worshipping animals and regarding them as carriers of gods and goddesses in the polytheistic tradition has been practiced for ages in India. The paintings like “Battle of Plassey” (Fig.16) by Francis Hayman (1708-1776) where the Indian

elephant is shown as weaker than the British horse, or “Tiger Hunting in the East Indies” (1802) (Fig. 17) by Richard Earlom where a tiger, often symbolically associated with the Indian rulers, is butchered by the British officials with the help of native Indians, and the slaughtering of the Indian cows by the British soldiers exemplify the practice of animal colonialism in India breaking the traditional view of Hinduism regarding the animals as sacred and never making a difference between ‘the soul of a human being and the soul of a man’ (Krishna, 2010).



Fig. 16: “Lord Clive meeting with Mir Jafar after the Battle of Plassey” (1760) by Francis Hayman© Wiki Commons



Fig. 17 © Yale Centre for British Art

This colonial practice of using the sacred animals of India as ‘beasts of burden’ was decolonized with images like “Bharat Mata” (1935) (Fig. 18) where the ‘goddess’ Bharat Mata is presented with elephant and lion and goddesses Saraswati and Laxmi are seen behind her; or “The wish-fulfilling cow” (1880) in which the cow is presented as a sacred figure containing different gods in its body and being worshipped by a Hindu priest, and Bharat Mata is milking from it and sharing the milk to the European colonizers; or images lion, regarded the bearer of goddess Durga in Hinduism, killing Mahisaur, often personified the British as in Nazrul’s poem “Anandamoyer Agamane” (“On the arrival of the Goddess of Delight”), as in “Astabhuja Devi” (Fig. 19) of 1910 by Raja Ravi Verma.

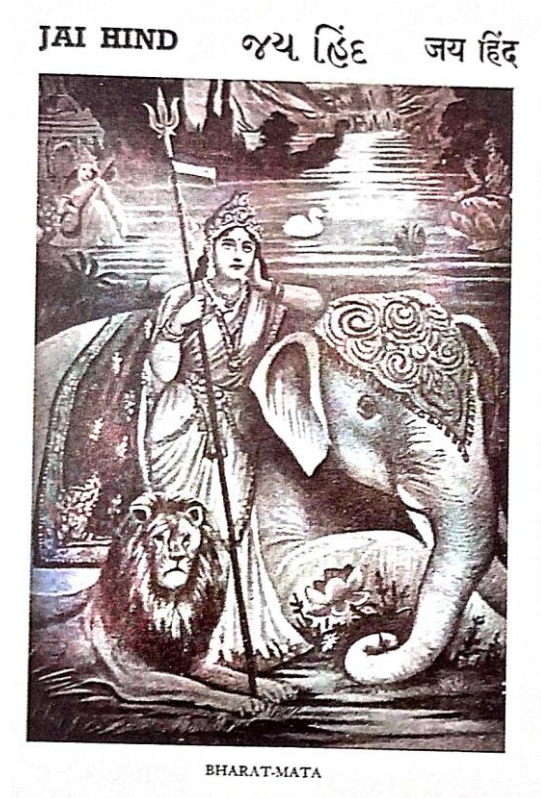


Fig.18 © Neumayer & Schelberger (2008)

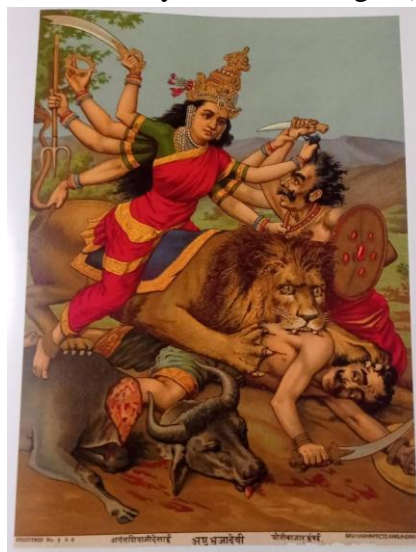


Fig.19 © Neumayer & Schelberger (2008)

This realization of metaphorical transformation of an artist's thought and perception in visual, verbal, or audio form not only universalizes the definition of art as trans literature but also supports the definition of art as the mirror of contemporary society. Again, the metamorphosed figures of Bharat Mata as a goddess protecting the nation against the patriarchy of colonization and of the freedom fighters as Hindu gods fighting against the demonic colonizers not only create a religious nationalism among the people of India but also establish the superficiality of polytheistic tradition against the self-imposed monotheism of Abrahamic religious tradition followed by the Islamic and the Christian invaders of India.

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