

Bharat Mata: Mother of All India
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“The geography of a country is not the whole truth. No one can give up his life for a map.”

Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World*

Throughout his seven-decade career, Indian artist Maqbool Fida Husain was no stranger to controversy. So when an *India Today* advertisement featuring one of the artist’s paintings for the exhibition “Art For Mission Kashmir” debuted in February 2006, backlash for Husain’s work was not unexpected – however the storm that brewed for years after was. Supreme Court cases were brought forth, effigies were burned, and death threats were even levied toward the artist oft referenced as the “Picasso of India.”¹ Due to the unbearable acrimony, constant legal challenges, and threats to his safety, Husain was eventually forced to flee his native country, and eventually died in exile.

The source of this controversy? A depiction of a scarlet-hued nude woman, contorted as to assume the geographic silhouette of the Indic peninsula. Tattooed across her form are the names of major cities of that subcontinent. Above her spine the peaks of the Himalayas, scrawled in a brash orange. Around her lie the emblems of the Indian-originated faiths – the dharma wheel and the seated Buddha. Though untitled, viewers immediately labeled the work a portrayal of Bharat Mata, or Mother India, the nationalistic persona that arose during the nineteenth century battle for independence from the British Raj. As she is traditionally endowed with the form or persona of Hindu deities, the Indian far right immediately objected to this depiction – especially for Husain’s

¹ Shaw, Siddharta. "Faced with Promise and Protest: MF Husain." *ArtAsiaPacific*, September 1, 2010. <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/70/MFHusainFacedWithPromiseAndProtest>. Adams, Susan. "The Picasso of India." *Forbes*, December 26, 2005. <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2005/1226/128sidebar.html>

daring to “disrobe our Beloved Bharat Mata.”² And though not explicitly stated, Husain’s position as a Muslim representing a figure with such strong Hindu associations in post-Partition India undoubtedly fed into the perception of his denigrating and debasing the quasi-deity.

However, rather than serving as a deliberate and sacrilegious depiction, the 2004 Husain illustration of Mother India draws upon and modernizes artistic and religious historical example to craft an incarnation of Indian nationality, both detached from and self-aware of the tensions between the faiths present in the region. M.F. Husain’s utilization of geographic representational precedent, multi-spiritual iconography, and desexualized femininity in *Bharat Mata* de-sanctifies and unifies the imagery of the nation’s embodiment to act as a personification of Indic harmony, rather than a portrayal of religious divide.

But to understand the shock that accompanied this representation of Mother India, one must first examine the roots behind the figure, and the conventional depiction of the Indic personification. Bharat Mata, as the female embodiment of the nation, was given first breath during the late nineteenth century struggle over the British’s attempted division of Bengal. The oppositional movement fueled not only Bengali patriotism, but also nationalistic sentiment as a whole.³ Mother India as a feminine figure emerged as an amalgam of Hindu goddesses, often specifically taking the form of Lakshmi or Durga.⁴ The quintessential example is the prolific Bengali painter Abanindranath Tagore’s 1905 watercolor, *Bharat Mata*. In this classically drafted portrayal, Mother India is clad in saffron, surrounded by lotus blossoms, and cloaked in the vague aura of a Hindu deity. Carrying white cloth, an ear of grain, a palm-leaf book, and a string of prayer beads, Bharat Mata holds what Guha-Thakurta would view as the accouterments of the “blessings

² "MF Husain Disrobes Even Our Beloved Bharat Mata" Vivekayayoti. March 1, 2006. www.vivekajyoti.blogspot.com.

³ Neumayer, Erwin, and Christine Schelberger. "Of Cows and the Mother of the Nation." In *Bharat Mata: India's Freedom Movement in Popular Art*, 35-77. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁴ Gaenzsle, Martin, and Jörg Gengnagel. *Visualizing Space in Banaras: Images, Maps, and the Practice of Representation*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz KG, 2006.

of food, clothing, learning and spiritual salvation.”⁵ By encompassing the agrarian proclivities of the Indic population, Tagore’s *Bharat Mata* embodied the “anti-colonial nationalist ideal of self-sufficiency.”⁶ However its emphasis upon the Hindu religious identification of the majority populace inherently left the minority faiths of the subcontinent “alienated and disenfranchised” – a problem which stands to this day, and not only was undoubtedly prevalent in the thoughts of Husain at the time of his 2004 composition, but was also on the mind of many during the fight for Indian independence.⁷

During the early twentieth century fight for freedom from the British Raj, advocates of independence worried that the drivers of socioeconomic division within India – primarily caste and religion – would limit the potential of a united liberation movement. Thus the idea for a secular nationalistic shrine was conceived, and in 1936 Mohandas Gandhi inaugurated the Bharat Mata Mandir in the ancient sacred city of Varanasi. One contemporary visitor noted, “It called forth all the children of the land to the worship of the Mother, forgetful of divisions and differences ... we have often quarreled amongst ourselves, but the Mother called [us] together to forget our bickerings at her peace-giving feet.”⁸ But what distinguishes the representation of Mother India in the Bharat Mata Mandir from that of all of her previous incarnations is the total lack of figural representation. Instead, the feminized nation is represented only in her terrestrial form, a marble relief of the subcontinent’s topographical curvature. From the crests of the Himalayas to the deserts of Rajasthan, Mother India is here in her most universal context – as the sustainer, the provider of abundance that nourishes all of her children, regardless of faith or creed.

⁵ Guha-Thakurta, Tipati. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, C.1850-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

⁶ Khullar, Sonal. "An Art of the Soil." In *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930-1990*, 66. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015.

⁷ Banerji, Debashish. *The Alternate Nation of Abanindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt, 2010.

⁸ Gaenzsle, Martin, and Jörg Gengnagel. *Visualizing Space in Banaras: Images, Maps, and the Practice of Representation*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz KG, 2006.

It is from this precedent that Husain's Bharat Mata springs. While still encompassing the feminine figure, the body of Mother India is "conspicuously carto-graphed to approximate the scientifically mapped shape of India."⁹ In no subtle manner, the personified figure of the Indic peninsula blazes scarlet against the cerulean of the Indian Ocean, closely approximating the landscape of the subcontinent. Anthropomorphizing and divinizing the land itself through the presence of the goddess, Husain disconnects the nationalistic persona from the context of Hinduism, instead linking national identity and the Indian people to the land on which they stand. And while Husain maintains the inclusion of the major cities and towns of the subcontinent, as if to celebrate the common homes of Indian nationals, Bharat Mata's figural ambiguity obfuscates the political boundaries that complicate common understanding of land. While the contested regions of Kashmir and Pakistan remain on the peripherals of the image, they are not specifically demarcated as detached from the remainder of the subcontinent – as if Husain wishes to erase all that is not unanimous and universal from the map. For as Husain once said, "For me, India's humanity is what is important, not its borders."¹⁰

Husain's pursuit of a depiction of Indic harmony is continued in his utilization of religious iconography throughout the work. While Bharat Mata herself may possess some inherently Hindu characteristics – due to her figural roots in the portrayal of that faith's goddesses – the historically exclusionary persona is tempered by the religiously linked symbols surrounding her. At first glance, the Dharma wheel, common to both Buddhism and Hinduism, is easily registered. Commonly found on Indian currency and government paraphernalia due to its ancient Ashokan roots, the wheel acts as a reminder of the often inextricably linked pedigrees of the two faiths, and

⁹ Ramaswamy, Sumathi. *The Goddess and the Nation*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010.

¹⁰ "Cultural Nationalism in Indo-Muslim Art." In *The Crescent and the Couch: Cross-currents Between Islam and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Salman Ahktar, by Manail Anis Ahmed, 295-399. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008.

their shared Indic heritage.¹¹ However, Husain's invocation of interfaith unity does not end here. A seated Buddha rests in lotus position in the eastern Indian ocean, the enlightened one's fleshy head protuberance, or *ushnisha*, distinct even in his silhouetted form. A crescent moon peeks out from atop the heights of the Himalayas, invoking the *ay-yıldız*, or moon-star, of Islam. And in the western seas, a skiff skims the ocean's surface, conjuring Christianity's "fishers of men."¹²

In utilizing this diverse religious imagery, Husain seeks to move those people of faith who have been marginalized by the dominance of Hindu nationalism from the peripherals to the heart of Indian cultural life. The evocation of this iconography crafts a new incarnation of Bharat Mata – as a goddess of her people, not a deity of a specific faith. And the icons in the painting radiate out from the wheel, the symbol of the Indian republic found at the epicenter of the national flag. The placement of the Dharma wheel at the core of the image suggests that despite the range of peoples and faiths found on the subcontinent, in a perfect world India would pivot around the ideology of secularism, and an underlying devotion to the nation.

The most objectionable element to many detractors of Husain's 2004 depiction of Bharat Mata was the nudity of the feminine figure. Disparaged as a humiliating attack on the sanctity of the goddess, the portrayal of Mother India was decried as the perversion of a Muslim by many far-right Hindu nationalists.¹³ However, in this facet of the work as well, Husain's attempt was not to divide, but to unite the Indian populace. In the five-thousand year history of Indian art, nudity has been a frequent fixture, with both human and divine female figures appearing frequently in Indian sculpture and temple architecture.¹⁴ Husain himself has cited the use of nudity in depiction as a sign

¹¹ "Indian Secularism." In *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age*, edited by Linell Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, by T.N. Madan, 181-193. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

¹² Mark 1:17 NIV

¹³ "Postcolonial Relations: Gandhi, Nehru and the Ethical Imperatives of the Nation-Popular." In *The Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reader*, edited by Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudhuri, by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, 238-254. New York, New York: Routledge, 2011.

¹⁴ Guha-Takhurta, Tapati. *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial*

of respect, stating, “Nudity, in Hindu culture, is a metaphor for purity.”¹⁵ In his expressed rhetoric, the nudity utilized in depicting Bharat Mata is quite the opposite of an attack on the figure – instead, it is a link to centuries of common heritage and Indic art historical precedent, utilized by multiple indigenous faiths. This perspective on Husain’s rhetorical choice of portraying Bharat Mata in the nude has been echoed by many of his defenders, who note that Husain’s faith likely plays no small role in the criticism of his art. In 2007, this was noted by Kolkata artist Paritosh Sen, who noted:

"He's accused of painting goddesses in the nude when our classical art is full of nudity, eroticism and explicit sexual feats. I am sure that if I had painted the same images no hackles would have been raised. It is only because Husain is a Muslim that he is being subjected to this treatment. Not only the artist community, every sensible Indian must raise his voice against this."¹⁶

Additionally, the suggestion of perverse tendencies in Husain’s depiction of Bharat Mata seem fundamentally flawed when one examines the formal qualities of his depiction of the goddess. Mouth gaping, awkwardly contorted, seemingly bald, and lacking much conventional allure, Husain’s scarlet goddess is missing the illusionistic voluptuousness one often associates with sexualized imagery. Her body is still recognizably feminine, endowing the figure with what some might consider the inherent maternal potential required of Bharat Mata. But “faceless, headless, with flying tresses and limbs prone, spread-eagled and truncated,” Husain allows for the feminine figural possibility required of Mother India, while sparing the deity the objectifying sexualization

India. New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 249-253.

¹⁵ Chaudhury, Shoma. "“In Hindu Culture, Nudity Is a Metaphor for Purity”" *Tehelka*, February 2, 2008. http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main37.asp?filename=Ne020208in_hindu_culture.asp

¹⁶ Martyris, Nina, and Ratnottama Sengupta. "Across Bharat Mata, Support for Husain." *The Times of India*, May 8, 2007. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Across-Bharat-Mata-support-for-Husain/articleshow/2014732.cms>.

and eroticism of the obvious male gaze.¹⁷ The primary goal of this work is not to titillate, but converse. And in evoking the nude, that hallmark of Western modernism, Husain is possibly suggesting a contextual relocation of the perception of the Indic nation, shifting the visual language from that of Hindu nationalism to that of Western secularism.

In summation, Maqbool Fida Husain's 2004 representation of Bharat Mata is not the religious assault it is portrayed as to this day by far-right Hindu nationalists. Instead, it is a quieter type of picture – one that, through the utilization of art historical and cultural precedent, in addition to the iconography of unification, calls for a national reconciliation. In employing Bharat Mata, that constant embodiment of a nation, Husain did not wish to divide the populace – instead he sought to broaden the parentage of Mother India, reintegrating those who have been marginalized by the religious and cultural majority. While very much aware of the historical employment of Bharat Mata as a tool of sociocultural ostracism, Husain's portrayal of India is as a nation with the potential for great diversity and harmony. And in the end, as the painter once said, "I am an Indian and a painter, that's all."

¹⁷ Kapur, Geeta. *Barefoot Across the Nation: Maqbool Fida Husain and the Idea of India*. Edited by Sumathi Ramaswamy. Durham, North Carolina: Routledge, 2011. 38.

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