

---

## NOTES AND REVIEWS

### THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MOTHERHOOD IN BENGALI FOLKLORE

Sraboni Chatterjee, Pranab Chatterjee\*

#### INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how the concept of motherhood in Bangladesh and West Bengal (jointly called Greater Bengal before 1947) is used in four contexts, and then attempts to interpret why motherhood is attributed to human women who are not biological mothers, to selected goddesses and deities, and to the landmass known as Bengal until 1947. The first context is the actual biological mother and child relationship and its presence in the basic family unit. In this context, she is known as *mā* ('mother'). The second context is the assumed mother and child relationship, like step-mother and stepchild, foster mother and foster child, etc., and its presence in the basic family unit. This form of attribution is also made to women of a previous generation inside the extended family, like father's sister (*piśi-mā*), mother's sister (*maśi-mā*), and father's brother's wife (*kāki-mā*) and to women of a junior generation, like a daughter or a daughter-in-law. The third is the attribution of motherhood to unrelated women outside the family unit where the custom is to address them as a *mā*. The fourth is the attribution of motherhood to selected goddesses and deities that are culturally constructed and maintained with storylines mainly in

the oral tradition. It should be noted that the matching word for a male parent in the basic family unit is *bābā*, and it is also used as a form of address and a sign of affection to boys of the next generation. However, it is only occasionally used as a description or as a form of address to male deities or gods. In the fourth context, both Hindus and Muslims are known to refer to the landmass of what used to be Bengal as a *mā*. However, Muslims of Bengal do not honour the convention of referring to goddesses and deities as a *mā*. Table 1 summarises the four contexts in which motherhood is attributed by Bengali culture.

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Three research questions here are: Given that the word *mā* means a woman in a basic mother-child dyad, how and why is the word used outside that context and what social functions does it serve? Does attribution of motherhood have an impact on empowering females in a highly patriarchal society? What, if any, is the underlying logic that explains the popularity of the storylines narrated here?

The three questions are prompted by three different intellectual traditions. The first of them emerged as structural-functionalism,

\* Sraboni Chatterjee (srabonilc10@gmail.com) finished recently her baccalaureate at The University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Pranab Chatterjee (pxc6@case.edu) is the Grace Longwell Coyle Professor Emeritus at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland.

The authors of this paper wish to thank Professor P. K. Saha of Cleveland, Ohio, Professor Pushpa Misra of Kolkata, West Bengal, and Professor Dan Ben-Amos of The University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, for reading earlier drafts of this paper and making suggestions. They also thank Manu Chatterjee of San Francisco for providing technical assistance during the writing of this paper.

and variations of it were introduced by William R. Bascom (1954), Bronislaw Malinowski (2001 [1927]), Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952), and others. In recent times, it has been called neofunctionalism (Gans 1972; Alexander 1998; Luhman 2000 [1995]; Friedkin 2004). The basic position in this tradition is that storylines evolve in a social setting to perform some important functions. The second tradition has come to be known as gender studies, or studies of gender relations where attention is paid to the subtle, unconscious, and daily exercises of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours that are prompted by gender roles (Schneir 1994). Emphasis

is placed on how gender is an important mechanism by which power and resources are distributed in society (Beauvoir 1989; Fallaize 1998). The third intellectual tradition is influenced by Marxist thought (Marx and Engels 1970 [1845]; Marx 2009 [1844]), which proposes that religious and political ideologies in a society create a form of consciousness which, in turn, help disguise several forms of alienation (Israel 1971). They give the appearance of logical explanations of phenomena, and give the impression of being “logic in a popular form” (Marx 2009 [1844]; Banerjee 2010 [2002]).

Table 1. Four contexts of attribution of motherhood in Bengali folklore.

Context	Relationship	Attribution of Motherhood
Basic nuclear family	Biological mother/child dyad	The woman in the biological dyad is described and addressed as <i>mā</i>
Extended family	Assumed mother/child dyad, as in stepmother/stepchild	The woman in the assumed dyad is often described and addressed as <i>mā</i>
	Aunts who belong to the previous generation, like father’s sister, mother’s sister, or father’s brother’s wife	Women from the previous generation are described and addressed as <i>piśi-mā</i> , or <i>maśi-mā</i> , or <i>kāki-mā</i>
	Young women who belong to the immediate next generation, like daughters, daughters-in-law	The women from the immediate next generation are described and addressed as <i>mā</i> (meaning ‘daughter’) or <i>bou-mā</i> (meaning ‘daughter-in-law’)
	Women in supervisory position to servants	Addressed as <i>mā</i> , or as <i>piśi-mā</i> , <i>maśi-mā</i> , <i>kaki-mā</i> or as <i>dīdi</i> (meaning ‘an older sister’)
Greater community beyond the extended family	Women assumed to be from the previous or next generation (women assumed to be from the same generation are seen as sibling equivalents and not addressed as <i>mā</i> )	Women assumed to be from a previous generation are addressed as <i>piśi-mā</i> , or <i>maśi-mā</i> , or <i>kāki-mā</i>
Culturally constructed goddesses and deities in the greater community for Hindus	Goddesses and deities for Hindus	Goddesses and deities are described and addressed with a prefix of <i>mā</i> by Hindus
Culturally constructed disdain for goddesses that are seen as idols by Muslims The landmass known as Bengal before 1947, now Bangladesh and West Bengal	The host country and culture called Bengal (Bangladesh and West Bengal) – all people of Bengali origin are seen as her children	Bangladesh and/or West Bengal seen as mother by all

## METHODOLOGY

Storytelling formed the basic design of the study. The second author of this work is of Hindu Bengali origin, and retains native fluency in the Bengali language. His American-born daughter, the first author of this study, asked him why he addressed her as *Māmoni* (meaning 'jewel of a mother'). He answered that it is customary in the Bengali language for a father to address his daughter as a *mā*, meaning 'mother'. Then he went on to recall how in Bengal (now Bangladesh and West Bengal) it is customary to address a woman of the junior generation as a *mā*. Further, the word *mā* is used to address women of a senior generation, goddesses (who are socially constructed) of Bengal, and the landmass of what used to be Bengal. The Bengali father also remembered how the stories he narrates to his daughter were told to him by his mother when he was a child.

In this case, the focus was on the Bengali father, who has learned to address his daughter as a *mā*. His daughter then asked him to elaborate on who else in Bengali culture is addressed as a *mā* and how the convention prescribes the use of the word *mā* to women who are not biological mothers.

Narrating a series of storylines, the father began describing how Bengali culture teaches where the word *mā* is to be used. Such usages apply not only to biological mothers, but also to culturally constructed deities and goddesses, and to the landmass of Bangladesh and West Bengal.

### THE CONTEXTS IN WHICH A WOMAN IS ADDRESSED AS A MOTHER (*MĀ*)

The word *mā* is used, either as a free-standing form of address, or as a prefix (as in *Mā Durgā*, meaning 'Mother Durgā') or as a suffix (as in *kāki-mā*, or *māśi-mā* meaning an aunt who is the wife of father's brother or an aunt who is mother's sister). The term

is also used for non-kin women and for selected goddesses and deities.

The word *mā* is used where there is a basic dyad of a mother and a child. It is also used as a form of address used by the child to the mother. Thus in this context the word has two usages: a description of the role of a female parent, and as a form of address to that female parent.

The word *mā* may also be used when the female parent is not a biological mother, but is a stepmother or a foster mother. At times the person with a stepmother role is not addressed as *mā*, but is addressed by her first name. In such contexts, the role of the stepmother as a member of the family is tacitly accepted, but the respect owed a mother is not formally conferred. Further, often an aunt, like a father's sister, or a mother's sister, or a father's brother's wife (the Bengali language has exact words designating how and where in the family tree she is an aunt) is seen as a *mā* with an add-on suffix to the kinship terminology. Thus the kinship term for a mother's sister is *māśi*, and the description of that woman becomes *māśi-mā*. The form of address for that person then also becomes *māśi-mā*. Often the subsequent generation awards this attribution of motherhood to female members of the previous generation. Women in supervisory or otherwise authority positions in the extended family are usually addressed by their servants as a *mā*.

The next form of attribution is done by members of a senior generation, usually a father, or a father-in-law or a mother or a mother-in-law, to a daughter or a daughter-in-law. The word *bou* means a bride, and here the form of address becomes a *bou-mā*. Often women outside the family, especially women from high status families in the community are addressed as *mā*. Here there is no biological family but motherhood is attributed as a form of honour.

There is a large number of goddesses and deities that are culturally constructed and maintained in Bengal. Some of these

goddesses perform multiple functions, like providing protection from evil monsters or outside invaders and, simultaneously, providing a gift of food or a cure for an ugly disease.

#### GODDESSES IN BENGAL AND NORTH INDIA

Some goddesses, like Durgā, her incarnates, and her two daughters (Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī) are worshipped in Bengal (both Bangladesh and West Bengal) as well as in North India (Kinsley 1988; Hawley and Wulff 1996; Jacobsen et al. 2009; Chatterjee 2010; Chakravarty 2012). They are immensely popular in the Bengal region, and are sometimes referred to as Bengali goddesses (Maity 1988; 1989; Chatterjee 2010). It is a custom among Bengali Hindus to address these goddesses as a *mā*.

It should be noted that the stories presented below represent a local and folkloric development in Bangladesh and West Bengal. They were narrated by the Bengali father engaged in storytelling to his daughter. At times, the local Bengali stories differ slightly from the ones in North Indian Hindu tradition. For example, Satī and Pārvatī are not referred to as a *mā* in the Bengali tradition. Ola-Bibi and Bon-Bibi are not usually found in North India, and they too are not referred to as a *mā*.

#### *Satī, the First Incarnation of Durgā but Not Quite a Mā*

The legend of Satī, the first incarnate of Durgā, is one that ends in tragedy (Sati 2014). Satī, the beautiful youngest daughter of King Dakśa, had always loved and worshipped Lord Śiva, god of destruction and one of the most powerful forms of god. After years of prayer and refusing all other men, Satī is finally approached by Śiva who asked her to marry him. However, Dakśa, disgusted with Śiva's wildness, forbade his daughter to enter into the union. When Satī said that she would

marry no other man, her father shunned her and condemned her to banishment with her husband. The two retreated to the mountains and lived their lives in exile for many years. When Satī heard that her father was hosting all the gods in a large communal worship, with the exception of Śiva, she was overcome with grief at missing her natal family. She went to see her father with Śiva's permission. However, upon returning home, she was met with malice and found that Dakśa's hatred of her husband was stronger than ever. Feeling rage towards her father and upset at the dishonour of her husband, Satī prayed again to Śiva, vowing to return as a daughter to a father she could respect. She then stepped into a fire and immolated herself. (It should be noted that the narrative about Dakśa's daughter is spelled as Satī, and the practice of immolating a widow at her husband's funeral pyre is spelled suttee.)

So heartbroken over the death of his beloved, Śiva manifested as the terrifying Virabhadra, a monster with every weapon and hundreds of arms. He killed everything in his path and beheaded Dakśa. Afterwards, he travelled the world carrying Satī's burned body aloft, performing the Tāṇḍava dance, which is the source of all creation and destruction. The fifty-one places where parts of Satī's body fell are now considered holy places, called *śakti-pīthas*, or seats of power. Once her body was fully gone, Śiva retreated into the mountains and refused to come out of his self-imposed isolation. (For somewhat alternative versions of this narrative, see Doniger 2004; 2010.)

Satī exists somewhere between the plane of mortal human women and the great goddesses like Durgā. Thus her role and function is a somewhat contradictory one. Her story is remarkable in her defiance of her father, and utterly romantic in the depiction of Śiva's mourning. However, beyond that defiance and romanticism is one of the strongest cases for Hinduism's patriarchal society. There is no denying that Satī is powerful, but this is all in relation to Śiva. She has the ability to pull Śiva, the model hermit, out of his lonely

and austere lifestyle, and also to throw him back there. It is through Saṭī that we can limit Śiva into one of his two poles, the first being ascetic and the second erotic and passionate (Kinsley 1988: 38).

In addition, the story of Saṭī functions as the exemplar for the Hindu woman. If she has failed her husband in any way, and his death has preceded hers, she is expected to perform the (now outlawed) ritual of suttee, or immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Women who performed suttee were forever memorialised and worshipped for their goddess-like behaviour (Wadley 1977). In short, the story of Saṭī functions as a method for socialising women in how to treat men, specifically their fathers and husbands. A woman's loyalty to her husband is held above all else.

It should be noted that Saṭī is not addressed as *mā*. The attribution of motherhood never happens to Saṭī. She does not have any biological children, and Bengali Hindus do not see her as a mother figure.

#### *Pārvatī, the Second Incarnation of Durgā but Not Quite a Mā*

Pārvatī, meaning 'she who is of the mountain', is primarily seen as Śiva's wife, and her presence in the world is important because she is the mother of Śiva's children. Pārvatī is born to Himāvat, the Himalayan Mountains, and throughout her life she performs great feats of austerity in order to prove her ability to be Śiva's wife. She sits in the middle of four raging fires during the summer months, stands on one leg for years, and lives entirely in the mountainous wilderness. After several trials, Śiva agrees to marry Pārvatī, and the entire Hindu pantheon partakes in the marriage ceremony. Even though she produces two sons, she does not actually become impregnated and give birth vaginally to either child. However, she still manages to lactate and breast-feed her children. Kārttikeya comes out of the Ganges River, and Gaṇeśa is shaped by Pārvatī, from her sweat and dirt. Gaṇeśa,

made to be fiercely protective of Pārvatī, denies Śiva entry into Pārvatī's home in the mountains, and so Śiva becomes angry and decapitates his son. Śiva's actions infuriate Pārvatī, and in order to make amends with his wife, he replaces Gaṇeśa's head with that of a baby elephant and makes the young god immensely powerful. There are many ballads and legends that focus on the four as a happy family (Kinsley 1988). She also produces two daughters, Lakṣmī, goddess of wealth, and Sarasvatī, goddess of learning. Their place in Bengali folklore is discussed later.

The image of Pārvatī focuses on her 'sweet-heart' nature. Like Saṭī, her role in humanity is to domesticate the great god Śiva, to pull him from his asceticism and into reality, and most importantly to put godly children on the Earth. Yes, she is a mother, and though it is assumed that she consummated her marriage with Śiva, her children are born as extra-uterine miracles (Erndl 1993: 6). According to Wadley (1977), childbirth in the Hindu tradition is one of the most impure times in a woman's life as it is so temporally distant from virginity. Breast-feeding is a method of purifying both the mother and child after such an event. Pārvatī, although formally not addressed as a mother, manages to retain her chaste, desirable, young and pure status. Her function is to provide an exemplar of the ultimate female role.

#### *Durgā, a Goddess and a Mā*

The folklore of Saṭī and Pārvatī begets a strengthening of patriarchal ideals, specifically of the ideal woman and wife, whose power manifests in their virginity, chastity, and loyalty. However, the goddesses Durgā and Kālī cannot easily be pigeonholed. First, the goddesses are more human and are tied to their male consorts. Kālī and Durgā, who in no way are human, are recognised as mothers to human-kind. Their divinity is physically marked with extra arms that hold weapons, third eyes, and a being of immense power below their feet. In the case of Durgā,

a lion or tiger mount, and in the case of Kālī, the god Śiva. Both are referred to popularly as Mā Durgā and Mā Kālī.

Durgā is, arguably, one of Bengal's most revered and celebrated goddess. Shaktism, one of the three sects of Hinduism that are more monotheistic in their rituals, worships Durgā. The other two, Shaivism and Vaishnavism, worship Śiva and Viṣṇu respectfully, both males (Kinsley 1988: 95–98). The myth of Durgā is as follows. Mahiṣāśura, a water-buffalo demon was granted a boon by Śiva that no man or god would ever be able to kill him. As Mahiṣāśura ran amok, killing both people and gods, the great gods were all incapable of killing him. With the fate of the world in their hands, they created Durgā from Pārvatī. Each god gave her one of their fearsome weapons, so that each of her ten hands held the most valuable materials in the world. Himāvat, Pārvatī's father, gave her a great lion mount. Durgā went to war with the demon, and defeated him in a bloody fashion.

There are several critical differences between Durgā and Pārvatī, or Satī. The major one is that although Durgā was created from the male gods, her role is always one of a protector. The situation warranted a superior warrior who could extinguish evil and nurture good, and who was most critically female. Durgā's lieutenants in her battles against male demons are an all-female group of mother goddesses. And Durgā always wins. Although in recent tradition she has been called Śiva's wife, because of her affiliation with Pārvatī, Durgā is portrayed almost always separate from men and forever a maiden. Also unlike Pārvatī, Durgā is born fully formed, without a human-like childhood. Her trials of proving herself as a goddess were action oriented, instead of passive. Durgā has two daughters who are also goddesses: Sarasvatī (goddess of learning) and Lakṣmī (goddess of wealth).

What possible function could Durgā hold in the patriarchal society of Bengal? She does not temper the gods, and is not the archetypical wife and daughter. She represents femininity as an indirect challenge to the tradi-

tional role of the female popularised by legends, and by myths of Satī and Pārvatī. She is the embodiment of female power that is not submissive to a male dominated cultural system. She is, however, not outside of this system, as she does maintain the crucial component of intact virginity. In the male dominated cultural system of Bengal, Durgā is the ultimate mother. She is a great warrior who can destroy all demons and gods, and acts on behalf of the gods and protects the welfare of humanity.

Unlike Satī and Pārvatī, Durgā is seen as Mā Durgā, meaning she is a universal mother. She protects her children from evil monsters. She also carries the nickname Annadā, meaning 'she who brings the gift of food grains', and thus, protects humanity from famines.

#### *Kālī, a Goddess and a Mā*

Our analysis of Durgā threatened the black and white quality of many of the studies of females in Hindu folklore; that women in Bengali Hindu folklore must either support patriarchal values or deny them. Kālī even further dismantles this divide. Whereas many goddesses are often described by their fair beauty, Kālī is dark and terrifying. Kālī means black. She is naked, and only covers herself with a skirt made of severed arms, a necklace of decapitated heads, and serpent bracelets. Like Durgā, she is ardently celebrated in Bengal. Her myth is as follows. Durgā is fighting the great demon Raktabīja, who can reproduce himself with every drop of his blood that hits the earth. Durgā, frustrated that she and her *mātrikās* ('little goddesses') cannot seem to kill this demon, cuts off the head of Raktabīja and places it over her tongue, swallowing each drop of his blood so that it does not fall to the ground (Kinsley 1988). The blood of the beast transforms Durgā into Kālī.

Kālī has some important devotees and admirers. It can be suggested that she has had strong political support in Bengal over several centuries. The nature of such support

is manifested by the poetry and songs written by Ramprasad Sen (1720–1781) that are still recited and sung by her devotees and admirers. Anthony Firingi (d. 1836), a Portuguese Catholic who settled in Bengal, composed many songs to honour her. Ramkrishna Paramhansa, born Gadadhar Chattopadhaya (1836–1886), is alleged to have carried on conversations with Kālī almost every day. Ramkrishna's disciple Swami Vivekananda, born Narendranath Dutta (1863–1902), wrote poems celebrating the presence of Kālī, and his poem (written in English) *Kali the Mother* is still recited by school children. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhaya (1838–1894), a famous Bengali novelist who is often compared with the Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), wrote novels about how disciples of Kālī offered sacrifices to her. During the 19th century, there were groups of bandits (called *thugees*, adopted by the English language as 'thug') who were devotees of Kālī. Sumanta Banerjee (2010 [2002]) has observed that Kālī has moved a long way in popularity, from being a deity of bandits in a jungle to a resident goddess in large temples in and around urban Kolkata (formerly Calcutta).

#### *Chīnnamastā, a Goddess and a Mā*

Chīnnamastā means 'she who has decapitated herself'. She is another incarnate of Durgā and of Kālī. This goddess is a representation of extreme violence. She is so bloodthirsty that she has beheaded herself, has blood spurting out of her body, and she is holding her decapitated head in one hand with its mouth open. Blood is falling into the open mouth of her severed head. However, even in this form of extreme violence, she is offering protection to her earth-children.

#### *Candī, a Goddess and a Mā*

Candī is another incarnate of Durgā, particularly popular in eastern India and Bangladesh. She is often shown with either eight

or ten arms, seated on a lion. There are many folktales and songs describing her power to protect her earth-children. She is the central figure in *Chandi-mangal*, a book of songs and verses in medieval Bengal (circa 15th or 16th century). Candī is seen as a *mā*, and is addressed as Mā Candī.

#### *Ṣaṣṭhī, a Goddess and a Mā*

Ṣaṣṭhī is a goddess of fertility. She is venerated and seen as a giver of male children. In rural Bengal, women acquire respect and power by becoming the mother of male children. For this reason, women worship Ṣaṣṭhī. She is addressed as Mā Ṣaṣṭhī.

#### *Lakṣmī, a Goddess and a Mā*

Lakṣmī is a goddess who, when pleased with her devotees, rewards them with wealth. She is also known as Kamalā, which means 'the goddess who sits on a blooming lotus flower'. She is a daughter of Durgā. Lakṣmī is seen as a *mā*, and an idol representing her is often left on an altar in Hindu households throughout the year.

#### *Sarasvatī, a Goddess and a Mā*

Sarasvatī is a goddess who is seen as another daughter of Durgā and, like Lakṣmī, is not a biological daughter of Durgā. She is the goddess of knowledge and, when pleased by a group of devotees, rewards them with a gift of knowledge. Thus devotees who require the acquisition of knowledge must please her and offer worship services to her. Sarasvatī is seen as a *mā*, and is often worshipped during the winter months.

#### *Manaśā, a Goddess and a Mā*

Unlike Durgā, her incarnations, and her daughters, Manaśā is a local goddess in Ben-

gal. In a land where there are many varieties of snakes, she is in control of all snakes. Displeasing her means inviting snake bites followed by painful death. The following story portrays her power (see Chatterjee 2010: 114–116). Chand the Merchant was a wealthy and very successful businessman. Manaśā wanted him to worship her, but he was not interested in doing so. Manaśā, out of profound rage, made his merchant ships sink and his six sons die from snake bites. She also threatened him that his seventh son, Lakśmindar, too will die of snake bite. Chand built a well-guarded palace for Lakśmindar and his newlywed wife Behulā. However, somehow one of Manaśā's snakes got inside that palace, and succeeded in planting a bite on him. Lakśmindar too was thus a victim of snake bite. Behulā, the newlywed wife of Lakśmindar, refused to accept her husband's death. She built a small boat made out of banana leaves, placed her husband's body in it, and then got in it herself. She then began rowing the boat downstream, in search of heaven to plead with the gods there.

Behulā, as the story goes, did succeed in reaching heaven, and got her husband's life back. This involved a political settlement with Manaśā, where Chand agreed to offer worship to Manaśā. However, a compromise was reached where Chand would offer worship to Manaśā only with his left hand, since his right hand was already designated for worship to Śiva. It should be noted that in Bengali culture the right hand is designated for worshipping, for eating dinner, and for other activities that are seen as 'clean and respectful'. The left hand, however, is used for 'unclean activities'. Thus Chand's proposed worship of Manaśā involved a political settlement, where the worship was offered with the unclean hand.

The story of Behulā is perhaps another example of creating role models for women who are chaste and dedicated to their husbands. A recently introduced theatre in Kolkata, called Chand Baniker Pala (meaning 'story of Chand the Merchant'), claims that the story of Behulā was introduced to per-

petuate the exploitation of women. Behulā remains a human female in Bengali folklore. She is not a goddess, and is not a *mā*. Manaśā, however, is a goddess, and is seen as Mā Manaśā.

#### *Śitalā, a Goddess and a Mā*

Śitalā is a goddess dedicated to the disease of smallpox. When one contracts smallpox, the linguistic convention to describe the situation is: "She (or he) is receiving kindness from Śitalā". Offering worship services to Śitalā (and by the right hand) involves a tacit bargain. It means that Śitalā is being worshipped, and as a result she would not send her "kindness" to the children of earth. She is a goddess, and is a *mā*.

#### *The Islamisation of Deities: Ola-Bibi and Bon-Bibi*

Two female characters, Ola-Bibi and Bon-Bibi, do not carry goddess status, and neither do they carry the title of *mā*. To Hindus, she was known as Oladevi in the 19th century. She was a deity who provided protection from cholera (Oladevi 2013). The word *bibi* is of Islamic origin and it means 'a lady of the house'. Muslims are not allowed to confer goddess status to an imaginary figure or an idol. However, they too needed protection from cholera and the tigers of Sunderban forests. So, it seems, they created local folk heroines for protection and gave them a suffix of *bibi* (Nicholas 2003).

#### *The Landmass of Bengal (before 1947) as a Mā*

The two geopolitical entities, Bangladesh (an independent nation state) and West Bengal (a state within the Republic of India) were known as Greater Bengal and was a province in British India. In 1947, Bengal was partitioned into two halves, the eastern part becoming East Pakistan and the western part

becoming West Bengal. In 1971, East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh. After acquiring nationhood, Bangladesh adopted a popular Bengali song, *Amar Sonar Bangla* ('My golden Bengal') composed by the Bengali poet Rabindranath Thakur (1861–1941) as its national anthem. The poet is also known by his Anglicised name, Rabindranath Tagore.

The song by Rabindranath envisions the landmass of Greater Bengal as a mother. However, he was not the first poet or musician to attribute motherhood to this landmass. During the latter part of the 19th century, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya (1838–1894) published a novel called *Anandamath* ('An Abode of Joy'). In this novel, a group of Hindu monks are depicted singing a song called *Bande Mataram* ('We Praise the Mother'). It appears that it is Mother Bengal who is being praised, and the song became a solidarity chant for freedom fighters in the region. Many other Bengali poets and songwriters of the time also composed music praising Mother Bengal.

The song, *Amar Sonar Bangla*, in addition to being the national anthem of Bangladesh, remains a popular song in West Bengal. It appears that the concepts of Greater Bengal before 1947, and that of Bangladesh and West Bengal as separate entities since 1947, continue to carry some loyalties to persons of Bengali origin. However, Mother Bengal never acquired the status of a goddess, and perhaps for that reason, never posed a threat to the monotheistic theology of Islam.

#### RETURNING TO THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

At this point, we return to the three research questions posed earlier in this paper. What are the functions served by attributions of motherhood? There seem to be several functions served by the storylines. The first of these functions is that these stories, without the attribution of motherhood (as in Satī, Pārvatī, and Behulā), provide role models

for socialisation of women in Hindu communities. These roles are presented by the culture as "proper and desirable" womanhood. Bascom (1954) came to this same conclusion when he suggested that folklore has several different functions. It allows "socially approved outlets" for individuals to escape repression in society. It also validates cultural practices and stresses the teaching of these rituals and society's approved values to the younger generation. Further, folklore functions as an instrument of social pressure to achieve social control.

To these observations by Bascom, we add that another function served by the attribution of motherhood to women, especially in its use in the extended family and the community, is that it infuses incest taboo between older men and younger women. A young woman who is addressed as a *mā* cannot be approached as sexually available, since the use of the word *mā* suggests incest and creates a barrier between them. Yet other functions served by the use of the word *mā* to goddesses and deities is that she provides protection from evil outsiders and is imagined to bring a gift of food grains (as is done in the use of the name Annadā, which in Sanskrit means 'she who brings the gift of food'). The landmass of Bengal, despite being very fertile, has seen many famines over time.

The Muslims, however, do not honour the convention of culturally constructed goddesses and deities who are seen as idols, although Hindus do. However, both honour the landmass of Bengal as a *mā*.

What function could be served by the attribution of motherhood to the landmass of Bengal? From the 19th century and thereafter, many writers and musicians introduced poems and songs praising Mother Bengal. Such poetry and music supported a Bengali identity and ethnic pride in being a Bengali. It continues to this day.

Does attribution of motherhood have an impact on empowering females in a highly patriarchal society? Biological motherhood (especially of male offspring) creates relevance and purpose for females. Attribution of

motherhood to females who are not biological mothers gives the appearance of empowerment of human women in a highly patriarchal extended family and community.

A work by John S. Hawley and Donna M. Wulff (1996) has suggested that the monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) have maintained a vision of the divine as a male being, and have limited the portrayal of the divine as female. On the other hand, Hinduism, as reflected in its storylines, has presented the vision of the divine as mostly female. Here the female goddesses are immensely powerful, yet are very nurturing of humankind. Saumitra Chakravarty (2012: 1) has added:

Worship of female goddesses belongs primarily to the domain of womenfolk and is part of their daily struggle against adversity through a plea of divine intervention. Simple worship forms part of the large repertoire of rituals, chanting and narration through which rural women seek to placate powerful rural goddesses.

This form of worship is the only safeguard that villagers have against the many ills that plague their daily lives – poverty, disease, invasion after invasion by various warlords, massive floods and cyclones, crop failure, and domestic distress. The storylines are a part of a rich oral tradition preserved largely within the sanctity of the home by rural women.

It appears that the attribution of motherhood to the goddesses is an acknowledgement of their popularity and power. However, the same is not true for human women in the community and the family. Empowerment for them comes mostly through biological motherhood of male children.

Does the attribution of motherhood to the landmass of Bengal provide a form of empowerment to persons of Bengali origin? Quite possibly it does. However, such empowerment has less to do with gender and more to do with religion. Praising Mother Bengal began from persons of Bengali Hindu origin (in the novel called *Anandamath* by Bankim

Chandra Chattopadhyaya) and has remained a solidarity chant by Bengali Hindu people.

What is the underlying logic in the storylines narrated? Karl Marx had observed that religious and other ideologies often disguise the suffering of the masses (Marx and Engels 1970 [1845]). Joachim Israel (1971) elaborated how religion fosters various forms of alienation and serves as a popular logic to oppressed masses. Using the same observation by Marx, seen as “logic in popular form”, Banerjee (2010 [2002]) has outlined how the myths, storylines and folklore are popular inventions that offer to make sense of human existence in a hostile environment. They create cognitive consonance for village masses in an environment that is otherwise either ambiguous or hostile.

What form of underlying logical structure emerged in the storylines supporting Bengali ethnicity? It appears that in Bangladesh a conflict of storylines has emerged. One such storyline calls for creating loyalty to an Islamic society. The other creates loyalty to an ethno-lingual Bengali society. A similar situation has also emerged in West Bengal, where one storyline supports Mother Bengal and, therefore, an ethno-lingual Bengali society. The other supports Mother India, a large, federated modern state. Taken together, the storylines contribute to divided loyalties in both Bangladesh and West Bengal.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is observed that the Bengali word *mā* is used in four contexts. The first of these four represents a biological kinship, and the word *mā* denotes a basic mother-child dyad. The second and the third contexts use the same word to denote women in the extended family and the community. The fourth context uses the word as a form of address to culturally constructed goddesses and to the landmass of what used to be Bengal before 1947.

It is further observed that addressing goddesses as *mā* is multifunctional in Bengali

society. Hinduism (and Bengali Hinduism in particular) has presented the vision of the divine mostly as female. Here the female goddesses are immensely powerful, yet they still nurture humankind. The storylines they offer give the appearance of a logical cohesion and explanation about what life is to the people of Bangladesh and West Bengal.

## REFERENCES

- Alexander, Jeffrey. C, ed. 1998. *Neofunctionalism and After*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Banerjee, Sumanta. 2010 [2002]. *Logic in a Popular Form: Essays on Popular Religion in Bengal*. London: Seagull Books.
- Bascom, William R. 1954. Four Functions of Folklore. – *Journal of American Folklore* 67 (266): 333–349.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. 1989. *The Second Sex*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.
- Chakravarty, Saumitra. 2012. Defeating Patriarchal Politics: The Snake Woman as Goddess. A Study of the Manasa Mangal Kavya of Bengal. – *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 30. <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue30/chakravarty.htm> (accessed April 12, 2014).
- Chatterjee, Pranab. 2010. A Story of Ambivalent Modernization in Bangladesh and West Bengal: The Rise and Fall of Bengali Elitism in South Asia. – *Asian Thought and Culture* 65. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Doniger, Wendy, ed. 2004. *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from Sanskrit*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Doniger, Wendy. 2010. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Erndl, Kathleen. 1993. *Victory of the Mother: The Hindu Goddesses of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Fallaize, Elizabeth, ed. 1998. *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader*. London; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Friedkin, Noah E. 2004. Social Cohesion. – *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (1): 409–425.
- Gans, Herbert. 1972. The Positive Functions of Poverty. – *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (2): 275–289.
- Hawley, John S. and Donna M. Wulff, eds. 1996. *Devi: Goddesses of India*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Israel, Joachim. 1971. *Alienation: From Marx to Modern Sociology*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Jacobsen, Knut; Helene Bast, Angelika Malinar and Vasudha Narayanan, eds. 2009. *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism* 1. Leiden: Brill Publishers.
- Kinsley, David R. 1988. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Luhman, Niklas. 2000 [1995]. *Art as a Social System*. Translated by Eva M. Knodt. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Maity, Pradyot Kumar. 1988. *Folk Rituals of Eastern India*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- Maity, Pradyot Kumar. 1989. *Human Fertility Cults and Rituals of Bengal: A Comparative Study*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 2001 [1927]. *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*. London: Routledge.
- Marx, Karl. 2009 [1844]. A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm> (accessed May 7, 2014).
- Marx, Karl; Frederick Engels. 1970 [1845]. *The German Ideology*, edited by Christopher John Arthur. New York, NY: International Publishers.
- Nicholas, Ralph W. 2003. *Fruits of Worship: Practical Religion in Bengal*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Oladevi. 2013. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oladevi> (accessed January 2, 2014).
- Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred. R. 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Addresses*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Sati: Daksha Prajapati Mandir. 2014. <http://www.vanamaliashram.org/Sati.html> (accessed December 16, 2013).
- Schneir, Miriam, ed. 1994. *Feminism in Our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Wadley, Susan. 1977. Women and the Hindu Tradition. – *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3 (1): 113–125.