Popular Imaginings, Political Space, and Performative Arts in Swadeshi Bengal

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During 2001–02, a few popular Hindi filmmakers based in Mumbai made biopics of Bhagat Singh to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the martyrdom of India’s most celebrated revolutionary. One of those films, Rajkumar Santoshi’s The Legend of Bhagat Singh, enjoyed commercial success as well as critical acclaim. The MTV generation, born and brought up in the 1990s and exposed to American pop-music culture by the (dis)grace of the liberalized Indian economy, was the first to ever witness the strength of indigenous performative media and the role it played during the nationalist movement, which they were able to do by watching the entry of the protagonist—Bhagat Singh—in this movie.

The film has a sequence where a theatrical performance is organized by a group of students of the National College of Lahore. The audience consists of both the “natives” and the English officials of the city. Another group of National College students, consisting of Sukhdev, Bhagwati Charan Bohra, and many later life comrades of Bhagat Singh—who were, however, unacquainted before the performance—was not at all pleased by the news of this performance, for they anticipated it as a means of entertaining the British during their leisure time. Thus, they enter the auditorium with a plan, prepared to ravage the British nighttime entertainment in the name of theatrical performance. But things do not turn out as planned.

2 As a contributing editor of US-based lifestyle magazine Vanity Fair, Robert Sam Anson estimated in the year 2000 that Music Television, popularly known as MTV, had over 340 million viewers across the globe. At that point in time, this television network was operating in 139 nations. Anson argues that the impact of this twenty-four hour music channel remained dominant among young people from its inception in the early 1980s. By the end of the 1990s, the United States achieved the status of an MTV nation because of this channel’s popularity and influences on tastes in music, fashion, and lifestyle. In India, it started its journey in 1996. By the early 2000s, at least one generation was under its influence. See Robert Sam Anson, “Birth of an MTV Nation,” Vanity Fair (November 2000): 206–48.
During the performance of the drama, the entry of Bhagat Singh, with the popular song *Pagdi Sambhal Jatta*, is set in context when a Jat peasant, along with his fellow villagers, is just about to offer his turban at the feet of an English official as a sign of submission. The peasant was looking for mercy—probably for his inability to pay taxes within the deadline. The song progresses with the protagonist trying to persuade all the peasants and the villagers with a reminder that the Sikh turban is a symbol of their self-dignity. The entire mise-en-scene takes hardly a moment to create a visual representation of the everyday life that the Indians were going through under British rule. As a consequence, the rebel students’ group, sitting in the back of the auditorium, not only cancels its plan to spoil the performance but also actively joins the actors on-stage. The entire theatrical performance evokes a common experience that every other Indian shared under British colonialism. As a consequence, the audience also starts to realize the emotional bond with the performers within the confined space of the theatre. For their part, these spectators could not resist participating in the euphoria. In the meantime, the performance makes the English officials leave the auditorium. This symbolically represents the possibility of the end of British rule, if the techniques of mass mobilization were successfully implemented. In a way, the entire space of performance is transformed into a miniature ground of struggle against the imperial superstructure in colonial India, with a possible realization of the nationalist aim of making the British quit their rule over the subcontinent.

This was the strength that performative mass media like theatre and songs (and the blending of these two art forms in most cases) demonstrated in late-colonial India. Along with this particular scene, another sequence of the film also brings to the attention of viewers the appeal of patriotic songs during the nationalist struggle. All those convicted in the Lahore Conspiracy Case, including Bhagat Singh, are incarcerated in the Lahore Central Jail. They are on a collective hunger strike against the discriminatory rule of the British Indian prison system. At the height of their physical degradation, all of them start singing, on their own, *Sarfaroshi ki tamanna* to give each other moral, ethical, 

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3 On the fiftieth anniversary of the Great Rebellion of 1857, Ajit Singh (1881–1947), the renowned revolutionary from Punjab and also the uncle of Bhagat Singh, started the *Pagdi Sambhal Jatta* movement, which later became a part of the Sikh discourse of resistance, especially among the peasantry and military regiments, against colonial rule. See Pardaman Singh, Joginder Singh Dhanki, eds., *Buried Alive: Autobiography, Speeches, and Writings of an Indian Revolutionary Sardar Ajit Singh* (New Delhi: Gitanjali Publishing House, 1984).

4 Originally composed around 1921–22 in Urdu poetry form by Bismil Azimabadi (1901–1978), who was a nationalist, freedom fighter, and poet from Bihar, *Sarfaroshi ki tamanna* was later immortalized by the famous revolutionary Ramprasad Bismil (1897–1927), who was associated with the Kakori Conspiracy Case of 1925. See Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature, 1911–1956, Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2006), 82.
and psychological support. The power of this (patriotic) song is such that it helps them forget all the suffering they have ever gone through. At the end, everyone has a smiling face, filled with renewed hope and inspiration. This confirms their zealous belief that they are supposed to endure all the pain in their struggle against the Empire.

Along with these two sequences, the entire film was significant, for it was made in the early years of the twenty-first century. By the turn of this new millennium, the people of India often found themselves stuck in narrow anti-Pakistan feeling (be it on an imaginary war front or on the cricket field), so far as channeling their sense of nationalism was concerned. In a way, the post-Kargil War years altered notions of nationhood in India. Under these circumstances, the Legend of Bhagat Singh provided a visual narrative of relatively complex issues like (a) the spatiotemporal dimension of nation and (b) the symbolic impacts of various emotions and shared sense of commonness inherent in the idea of Indian nationalism. During the heyday of the nationalist movement, these complex issues were reflected in patriotic songs, theatrical performances, and other performative media. The film itself substantiates this historical fact.

Herein also lies the significance of understanding the underlying distinctions between the concepts of nation, nationalism, and nationhood (for instance, in South Asian spatial contours). The early years of the new millennium also broadened the scope of historical scholarship in this direction, as scholars began to analyze the subtle differentiations between the notions of nationhood primordially present in the pre-modern age and the relation of the politically imagined nation to the advent of “modernity.” The good old days of Cambridge histories of the “locality-province-nation” have lost their capacity to capture the keen complexities of (South Asian) nationalistic feelings beneath a superficial plane. Even the decline of the “subalterns” in Subaltern Studies has created a research gap to look into, with new perspectives on categories like “nationality” or “nationhood” in the pre-colonial and colonial settings. In this regard, some major breakthroughs in the existing literature on Indian nationalism emphasize the approaches of intellectual and emotional histories as well as the history of ideas.

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6 Sumit Sarkar, Writing Social History (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82–108.
Although nationalism in the context of colonialism and anti-colonial struggle in India is a well-researched arena, the present monograph is an addition to another less explored domain of historical scholarship. It mainly engages with the task of constructing an “emotional history” of (Indian) nationhood or, in other words, locating the roots of Indian nationhood in the imaginary and cultural planes of Bengal during the swadeshi days. Concentrating on three different (yet closely connected and mutually influencing) forms of “performative media,” i.e., theatre, jatrapalas, and songs, the author tries to capture the complex process of how the cultural forerunners of Bengal attempted to shape the popular emotions of “felt community” at the local and regional levels. The monograph’s entry point is the line of argument that these popular emotions, in subtle and nuanced forms, already existed in the minds of Bengali (or Indian) people.

The task of writing an emotional history of the Bengali people has been attempted before, but it has not been undertaken by any professional historians until recently. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, a noted writer-cum-practitioner of history in his own right, made diligent attempts to document several aspects of the Bengali emotional world with historical understanding and social observation.7 On the other hand, academic historians working before the 1990s did not take this arena of historical research into consideration from the point of view of intellectual history writing. Rajat Kanta Ray, in his path breaking works on emotional history8 and on the nature of pre-modern nationhood,9 emphasizes the

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8 In 2001, Rajat Kanta Ray’s Exploring Emotional History initialized the academic endeavor to capture the multiple narratives of public and private emotions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These emotions were reflected in contemporary Bengali literature, especially in novels. Ray considers this new literary form an extended product of, and direct intellectual response to, the “Bengali renaissance.” He also looks into the new possibilities in the public sphere precipitated by this “renaissance,” or new awakening, which ultimately created a limited civil society under colonialism. On the other hand, the inner space of the Bengali household, in his view, was also restructured as a direct response to the penetration of the modernity, especially in the changing context of the indigenous (predominantly rural) society. To illustrate that Indian modernity was deeply rooted in the traditional nomenclature of indigenous (Bengali) society, Ray argues that modernity made a rupture in the cultural autonomy of village society in Bengal by imposing new superstructures—like educational institutions, political movements, railways, and so on. This resulted in the creation of a dilemma in the Bengali psyche around the tension between the new possibilities of the modern age and the emotions and sentiments firmly associated with the age-old customs and rites of an “organic society” that they would not leave behind. This “organic society” was comprised of the gentry, the peasantry, the artisans, and the untouchables (in the Bengali social structure). As Ray avers, their mentalities and their mutual interdependence, both economic and emotional, were best reflected in the way the wealth-generating process was related to the
role of literary traditions, local sentiments, private emotions, and mass interest in the formation of cultural community in Bengal and in India before the emergence of nationalism (in the modern political sense) and during the interaction between modernity and nationalistic awakenings in the subsequent nationalist phase.

Throughout the twentieth century, the performative arts—ranging from theatre (including street theatre) to music (especially the lyrical parts of songs) or sometimes even films\(^\text{10}\) (both popular and art-house cinema)—have been the major driving forces at different junctures of global political and social movements. Compared to earlier precedents, various instances of political resistance in the twentieth century made people recognize the strategic uses of performative media and promoted its gradual transformation into an effective political weapon to facilitate popular mass uprisings. Events like anti-war movements...
(in the context of the Vietnam War), or the Civil Rights movement in the United States are hard to imagine without the performances of Bob Dylan\(^\text{11}\) and Nina Simone\(^\text{12}\) respectively. Similarly, the role of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) in the left-wing politics of Bengal\(^\text{13}\) once again attests the significance of performative tools in mobilizing the masses in political and social movements. Indeed, the trend was strengthened in the post-war global scenario. But one of the earliest precedents for this type of mass contact technique had already been successfully implemented in the early years of the twentieth century in Bengal in the context of swadeshi.

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The monograph under review provides some fresh perspectives on the history of artistic development (here, mostly performative—if not, the texts of performances are considered) in the sociocultural spheres and how this progress helped the ordinary “unlettered” masses of Bengal apprehend nationalist feelings. Moreover, the study also highlights the centrality of multiple (and multilayered) emotions that the performative arts evoked during the swadeshi movement. A vast array of well-researched literature focusing on the relation between art and nationalism in colonial India has enriched the domain of cultural history. In addition, *Performing Nationhood* argues that the performative arts, like theatre, *jatras*, and songs (as distinct from visual art forms like painting), and the spaces of performance were not only confined to developing the emotional bond among the people but were also transformed into “an arena for contesting the colonial authorities during the swadeshi and boycott agitation” (p. xiii).

Previously, Tapati Guha Thakurta’s history of new “Indian” art\(^\text{14}\) explored, to some extent, the link between art and nationalism in the context of colonial Bengal. According to her, the artists and the aesthetics of this new “Indian” art precipitated the spread of nationalism in Bengal and eventually in India. Here, the artists (the painters *per se*) were solely devoted to the medium of painting, maintaining a safe distance from politics. Hence, their role as the lead actors

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behind the process of disseminating nationalist feelings in the public sphere was somehow limited. They often resorted to abstract expressions to disseminate their ideas, which were, in most cases, incomprehensible to the masses. It was only intermediary intellectuals who would transmit the messages of those paintings to the masses through their writings. But the readership was also very limited. The ordinary unlettered masses did not read those writings, nor did every literate person. They were only read by those who had an interest in the medium of fine arts. Thus, the political messages inherent in this type of artwork remained beyond the reach of commoners.

Contrary to the medium of fine arts, the performative arts needed almost no intermediaries to interpret the symbolic gestures of nationhood to the audience-turned-masses, whom Mimasha calls the “swadeshi public.” Such interpretation became possible because the powerful language of these performative media had an immediate appeal to the masses, which helped them understand the connectivity of the emotional world that those performers shared with the audiences within the boundaries of performative spaces, and even beyond that. The Bengali intellectuals, associated with these forms of performative arts, were engaged in a pedagogic project of educating the masses. On the other hand, a degree of cognitive autonomy persisted among those ordinary masses. They were free to interpret the inherent ideas, symbols, and leitmotifs used in the performances in their own way, without depending on the intelligentsia for any further interpretations. On a certain level, they also discussed the impact of those ideas and symbols after performances. Here, unlike in the medium of painting and fine arts, the unlettered masses owed nothing much to the intellectuals. Besides, performative media helped the masses situate themselves in the context of the descending order of life under the colonial regime, and gradually relate their existing conditions to the characters or the content of those art forms (the author calls this the “you-are-there effect”). Owing to these popular media, the masses started to realize the distinction between the dominance of the colonial authorities and their individual/collective existence as “oppressed self/selves.” Here lies the main thread of the major argument of the book, in which the author shows how the emotions became entwined with the process of constructing a common and shared “nationhood.”

Commonalities between the dramatists, playwrights, and composers of songs and jatrapalas, according to the author, were directed towards the triangular objectives of exploiting the performance “texts” (or “text-in-action”) to create a “space” of interaction between the performers (or sometimes urban

\[15\] Ibid., especially the fourth chapter, “Tradition and Nationalism in Indian Art: Art Histories and Aesthetic Discourse in Bengal in the Late Nineteenth Century,” 117–45.
and organic intellectuals) and the masses (here the audience mostly in-and-outside the spaces of performance). Based on the visual representations of certain “ideas” and “symbols,” the entire process was deliberately carried out with the purpose of evoking those popular emotions which were closely attached to notions of nationhood.

Earlier literature on “notions of nationhood” (in Bengal or beyond) was confined to explanatory grounds like the socio-psychological structures of indigenous society\textsuperscript{16} or economic and intellectual endeavors against the political economy of the colonial state.\textsuperscript{17} However, the present monograph captures the efforts and the deeds of both the performers and the audiences carried out in the swadeshi intellectual environment. It delves assiduously into the following inquiries: (a) how the texts-of-performance made an interconnected link between the world of performance and the daily lives of the masses under colonial rule; (b) how cultural developments acted as the agent(s) of change, complementing the “techniques of mass contact”; (c) how behind-the-scene agendas determined the production of these performative aesthetics; (d) how the popular performative arts were connected to the tools of resistance offered by the moderates, extremists, or revolutionaries.

Analyzing critically the emotional planes of nationhood, Mimasha Pandit’s study shows that the sense of nationhood on the basis of common identities or shared mentalities predominantly extended the horizon of modern nationalism in South Asia. In a broad sense, she has identified, in the context of the early decades of twentieth-century Bengal, a handful of sociocultural processes, interacting with each other, as the “emotional roots” of the realization of “swadeshi nationhood.”

In the first place, the transformation of regional stories into “stories of all” or “memories of us” and the construction of a sense of “indigeneity” came to the emotional surface. This dual process owed much to an effective construction of “collective memories,” as vividly created by the historical-social-mythological dramas, jatrapalas, or patriotic songs—the latter being performed either separately or as a part of theatre or jatras.

Secondly, a deliberate effort of restructuring the public sphere, confined to the spaces of performance, became evident with the transformation of the masses from “voiceless spectator” to “audible audiences.” During the performance, a sense of a common bond developed between the performers and the


\textsuperscript{17} Manu Goswami, \textit{Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space} (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2004).
viewers (or listeners in the case of songs). This ultimately resulted in the birth of a responsive and interactive publichood. This new publichood, categorized as a “theatrical publichood” or a “singing publichood,” started to imagine itself as a part of the “community of emotion,” as expressed through different forms of performance.

Finally, the transformation from the “community of emotion” to the “community of felt emotions” was intensified by the strategic utilization of a considerable number of popular symbols, leitmotifs, and images. In this case, the larger part of the audience-turned-masses was purposefully engaged to perceive their attachment to the spatial confines of their birthplace as a part of a broader connectivity to a national territoriality. Behind this connectivity, there was the perspective of an “imagined national self/selves” (vis-a-vis the presence of foreign “others”).

In a broad sense, Mimasha has followed the approaches of intellectual history towards identifying these tendencies of swadeshi nationhood. She looks through the disciplinary lenses of “cultural criticism” in order to decipher a hitherto unnoticed layer of the “texts-of-performance,” which she terms the “hidden transcript of resistance.” Here the centrality of violence as a means of discerning the notions of nationhood was closely connected to ideas like sacrifice, vengeance, freedom, or liberation. With a few exceptions, these ideas were evident in the texts-of-performance, mostly in a latent manner to escape official surveillance and police repression under the colonial state system. On the other hand, symbols like Kali, Adhya Sakti, and mlecchhas (the infidels) appeared in the texts with double meanings and innuendos. Altogether, these intellectual components helped shape the identity of a national “self” by denying, at least for some moments within the space of performance, the subordinated condition of “self” under the regime of colonial “other.” In this way, the transition of the national “self/selves” from the “voices of opinions” to the “voices of protests” was circumscribed by feelings of anger, frustration, and hostility towards the colonial “other.” Expressed in the performative media, this transition also legitimized violence as a political imperative in colonial Bengal.

Scrutinizing various aspects of the texts-of-performances or the performative spaces, the author argues that there was an attempt to impose a sense of “homogeneity” upon the masses, irrespective of their religious, class, or caste differences. This occurred through all kinds of performances which sought to appropriate popular perceptions of nation and nationalism. But it ultimately revealed—as the author laments—an internal conflict within the imagined “community of felt emotions.” This conflict arose in the form of differences of mentality between Hindus and Muslims over some theatrical (or other visual-performative-imaginary) misrepresentations of certain Muslim historical char-
acters by the Hindus that eventually showed the signs of a “fractured” nationhood. Notwithstanding these signs, a degree of homogeneity persisted in the level of propagation via performance of the idea that British rule was the root of all disparities for the oppressed “self/elves.” On the other hand, the performative space was utilized as a cultural site for counter-hegemonic struggle to establish the superiority of “us” against the “other,” at least on an imaginary level.

Mimasha, therefore, is more interested in unfolding what the performative arts revealed to the masses in reality and in the symbolic imagination. Her research is not at all confined to narrating how these mediums of theatre, jatrapalas, and songs became popularized throughout the length and breadth of Bengal during the early decades of the twentieth century. The balance between theoretical interpretations and the empirical narration of a particular historical event is efficiently maintained throughout this monograph. As the author mentions, the book is primarily a humble intervention in understanding the horizontally stretched spatial dimension of nationhood beneath the politically existent nation and nationalism in colonial India. The techniques used here—as the title indicates to some extent—include the tools of emotional history, supplemented and synthesized by the methods of disciplines like cultural criticism, literary theory, and social anthropology (p. xx).

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The academic task of exploring the interconnected relations between nation and nationhood from the perspectives of intellectual and emotional history is the reason Mimasha’s work may demand a unique place in the existing scholarship. With her efforts—(a) to fit into her studies categories like “nationalism” as a part of “the invention of tradition”\(^\text{18}\) or “nationhood” as an emotional manifestation of “the felt community,” and (b) to understand Habermas’s theory of the public sphere\(^\text{19}\) or Victor Turner’s “liminoid”\(^\text{20}\)—Mimasha has added a new approach to understanding the multifaceted spectrum of Indian nationalism, carefully setting aside the previous approaches of the Marxist or the Subaltern historians. This mixed approach (of intellectual and emotional history)

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remains evident in the different segments of the monograph. It is apparent especially where Mimasha shows how ideas like (revolutionary) resistance to the colonial regime or the economic “drain” theory of the early nationalists were propagated to the people through different forms of performance during the swadeshi days. In this regard, she also argues that slogans like Bande Matram were popularized among the masses (including the extremists, the revolutionaries), when they became synonymous with the idea of (revolutionary) resistance in Bengal and eventually in India. In this way, the author shows “how the notions of nationhood passed through stages of presentation, liminality, and (re)presentation to attain varied forms and features” (p. 140).

The arrangement of chapters might lead the reader(s) to assume an arbitrary division of the monograph into two thematic segments. The first three chapters narrate the interlocked links between the space and the texts along with the masses and the performers in creating a national community on the basis of felt emotion. Here the members of that “national” community perceived a sense of nationhood by immersing themselves in the performative space, not only as silent spectators but as an “audible audience.” The second section (of the last two chapters) is an extended derivation from the first segment. The focus on the peculiarities of the texts and conflicts within this imagined-and-felt “national” community engages the readers in rethinking once again the “ambiguities of Indian nationalism.”

In a nutshell, the book is concerned with the strength and the vitality of non-print performative media, so far as the nationalist awakening among the masses is concerned.

Regarding its shortcomings, the monograph provides no indication whether the debates around the multiple definitions of “self-government” in the nationalist discourses during the time of swadeshi acquired any place in the compositions and the performances of the swadeshi theatres, jatras, or songs. Secondly, the study could have addressed the issue of whether (or to what extent) the swadeshi intellectuals considered the strength of performative media as a means to resolve the problems of fractured nationhood, which became evident in the differences of mentality among different communities or religious groups. Thirdly, historians like Dilip Menon or Kris Manjapra, in recent times, for a deeper understanding in this regard, see Benjamin Zachariah, Playing the Nation Game: the Ambiguities of Indian Nationalism (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2011).

In the context of South Asia, the relation between non-print performative media and the nationalist struggle is a less-explored area of historical research. On the contrary, print media has attracted a wide range of scholarly attention from time to time. For a recent publication in the historical scholarship on the relation between print media and the nationalist struggle in India, see Sukla Sanyal, Revolutionary Pamphlets, Propaganda, and Political Culture in Bengal (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
have posited swadeshi, in terms of its spatiality and long-term implications, as a part of broader global intellectual and political developments, emphasizing the efforts of the swadeshi intelligentsia, including the swadeshi writers, lyricists, and performers. Mimasha’s work could have been richer if she had considered this dimension as well. On the other hand, a separate section for the glossary of (Bengali) colloquial terminology could be added in the next edition, although possible transliterations have been provided in the relevant sections of the different chapters. Lastly, the printing errors for a monograph published under the aegis of the Oxford University Press are too many to ignore.

REFERENCES


