

6-1-2010

Masculine Regeneration and the Attenuated Body in the Early Works of Nandalal Bose

Niharika Dinkar
Boise State University

Masculine Regeneration and the Attenuated Body in the Early Works of Nandalal Bose

Niharika Dinkar
Boise State University

In 2008, the works of the Bengali artist Nandalal Bose (1882-1966) enjoyed a rare North American museum tour, first at the San Diego Museum of Art and then at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In this first major international excursion, Bose's works were celebrated as an exemplar of the new modern visual language adopted by nationalist artists as they rejected Europeanized academic techniques in vogue around the turn of the twentieth century. Along with stalwarts like Abanindranath Tagore, Asit Haldar and Kshitindranath Majumdar, the '*swadeshi*' (indigenous) artists marked an emphatic turn to revive an 'Indian' aesthetic that has been seen to direct the course of modern Indian art since the early twentieth century.

However, despite the persistence of this celebratory narrative, one key aspect of *swadeshi* nationalist politics that has remained unexplored is the distinctive slender body their art authorised. Rejecting both the ample full figured body enshrined in classical literature as well as the anatomically accurate body sanctioned by colonial art education, the *swadeshi* artists proposed an alternative lissome figure whose delicate frame and shadowy presence formed the centerpiece of their art. *Swadeshi* claims for a modern Indian art were embodied in and through this figure that made alternative claims on the Indian body politic contesting colonial power as well as scriptural authority.

In this article I examine the gendered political arena of nationalist ferment within which *swadeshi* representations of the body were fostered, focusing on Nandalal Bose's early works between 1905-1915. I argue that the dramatic *swadeshi* attenuation of the figure responded to a crisis in masculinity in Bengali culture that saw the native man as emasculated in his inability to save the nation from the 'manly' Englishman. Nandalal's early paintings exhibit the anxieties of masculine identity within the Bengali *bhadralok* (middleclass) as it sought to counter the humiliations of colonial servitude in its bid for a national art.¹ Nandalal negotiates this predicament in two ways in his early works, in the first through an exploration of the effeminate male body in emancipatory ways and in the second, an affirmation of a masculine poetics enshrined in the figure of the *brahmachari* (ascetic). It is from the locus of this empowered native male body that Nandalal offers a response to the emasculating politics of colonialism and participates in the *swadeshi* project of envisioning a modern Indian art.

The Slender Body of *Swadeshi* Art

Nandalal Bose's early works were painted largely in the shadow of his association with the Tagores, particularly Abanindranath Tagore who served as the Vice-Principal at the Government School of Art in Calcutta where Nandalal had enrolled as a student.² In this early period between 1905-1915, he was actively involved in the project of *swadeshi* art which was experimenting with a new technique of 'washes' that granted the figures a shadowy, evanescent character. Influenced by Japanese painting, the effect was achieved by dipping the painting into water after an initial drawing, and thereupon after every successive layer of colouring.³ After a visit to Ajanta in 1909, Nandalal's style saw influences from the fifth century murals and his figures

¹ Bose's works were singled out as effeminate as early as 1910. 'What we look for in this artist is the growth of a vaster, more masculine, and more synthetic treatment.' (Sister Nivedita, 'The Exhibition of the Indian Society of Oriental Art' in *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, (hereafter, CWSN) vol. III (Advaita Ashrama: Calcutta, 2000) p. 55. This characterization of his works has persisted. Writing in 1994, Krishna Chaitanya deemed his figure of Krishna as Parthasarathi as 'androgynous if not wholly effeminate.' (Krishna Chaitanya, *History of Indian Painting: The Modern Period* (Shakti Malik Abhinav Publications: New Delhi, 1994) p.215.

² Nandalal Bose's early works found many admirers, but by the time of his centenary celebrations in 1982, the critical tide had turned against these works. See, K.G. Subramanyan, 'A Biographical Sketch', *Nandalal Bose Centenary Exhibition Volume* (National Gallery of Modern Art: New Delhi, 1983).

³ The Japanese art critic, Kakuzo Okakura, presented Bose with a stick of ink in 1912. Much of *swadeshi* painting drew inspiration from Japanese art and its project to envision a shared history for Asian art. See Kakuzo Okakura, *Ideals of the East* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1904).

acquired a more robust presence. By 1915, this early engagement with *swadeshi* wash art practices blended with an enthusiasm for Japanese painting including incorporating calligraphic representations and experiments with tempera. This coincided with his growing distance from Abanindranath Tagore and after the 1920s his figures express a vital earthiness that signals the development of his individual style.⁴ Many of Nandalal's works from this early period have been lost or destroyed and exist only in reproductions. In the early 1940s Nandalal recreated many of his early lost paintings in the typical wash style, although the colours and tones vary somewhat.

Nandalal Bose's early works display the incredible changes that marked the representation of the idealised body in *swadeshi* art. In the first decade of the twentieth century, both male and female figures in canonical Indian art were radically re-interpreted by nationalist painting. One sees a transition from heavier statuesque forms espoused by their predecessor Ravi Varma to delicate, slender shapes favoured by the *swadeshi* artists, which is remarkable given the widely accepted scriptural sanctions of ideals of beauty based on heavier models.⁵ This was evident as early as 1899 when Balendranath Tagore declared a preference for Shakuntala as a slender nymph rather than Ravi Varma's 'well nourished harem' maiden.⁶ The *swadeshi* experimentation with figural form however invited the consternation of the more orthodox members of the community. Sisir Ghosh, the editor of the *swadeshi* publication, *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* was outraged when he saw a picture of Abanindranath Tagore's Radha:

What have you painted? Is this the beautiful Radha with thin graceless arms and legs?
Her arms should be round and plump, her figure voluptuous. Are you not familiar with
Radha's description in Vaishnava literature?⁷

The slender arms and legs were singled out for attack as anatomical distortions that were closer in the popular imagination to witches from folktales rather than the idealised heroine (*nayika*) of classical poetry. The contemporary Bengali journal *Sahitya* became a prominent voice against the *swadeshi* artists' 'distortions' of figural forms taking broad swipes at Abanindranath Tagore's image of *Buddha and Sujata* (Fig.1), with oblique references to the vampire-like heroine:

the way in which Sujata's arms stretched out towards the Buddha, she should be able
to reach him even if he dangled from the branch of a tree. Her two sticklike arms
should have no difficulty in plucking the sun and the moon out of the distant
firmament, so elongated were they.⁸

Ravi Varma's figures (Fig.2) were noticeably broad shouldered and broad hipped, and both male and female forms are considerably fleshier – women have voluptuous curvy bodies and men have muscular torsos. Broadly speaking, heroic male figures were rendered leaner than demons like Ravana or Indrajit who were depicted as broad shouldered and muscular.⁹ By contrast, the forms favoured by the *swadeshi* artists of the Bengal school sported a much more slender ideal – women are wispy and delicate and even the male body is slight, devoid of the musculature of Ravi Varma's men. How can we understand this transformation in the idealised body? Geeta Kapur has claimed that Ravi Varma's preference for voluptuous and statuesque figures has its roots in his familiarity with temple painting and sculpture, suggesting that his conceptual references came from sources like

⁴ R. Siva Kumar notes that Nandalal Bose realized very early on that the wash style was very closely linked with Abanindranath Tagore 'and to adopt it would be to carry the burden of a style that did not suit his temperament.' R. Siva Kumar 'Nandalal: His Vision of art and Art Education' *Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose* (San Diego Museum of Art: San Diego, 2008) p.90 n.6.

⁵ One might offer that *swadeshi* art was responding to regional painting practices rather than Ravi Varma's pan Indian style. However, local painting practices like Kalighat also employed noticeably voluminous bodies.

⁶ Cited in Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1994), p. 279.

⁷ Abanindranath Tagore notes this in his reminiscences of the family home in *Jorasankor Dhare* (Beside Jorasanko). Cited in Mitter, *Art and Nationalism*, p. 279.

⁸ Cited in Mitter, *Art and Nationalism*, p. 359.

⁹ Masculinity and muscularity in the figures of Ravi Varma is a subject that demands much closer analysis. Kajri Jain has pointed to the scrawny and lithe depictions of Ram in Varma's images like 'Ram Vanquishing the Sea' and 'Ram Breaking the Bow' (Kajri Jain, 'Muscularity and its Ramifications: Mimetic Male Bodies in Indian Mass Culture', in Sanjay Srivastava (ed.), *Sexual Sites: Seminal Attitudes: Sexualities and Culture in South Asia* (Sage Publications: New Delhi, 2004), p. 306. However, Jain's analysis does not account for images of demons like Inderjit or Ravan who are more burly and muscular.

neo-classical Sanskrit poetry and Kathakali theatre.¹⁰ Similarly, Partha Mitter finds resonances between the *swadeshi* artists' attenuated forms and the works of the fin-de-siècle Symbolists.¹¹ There is considerable formal similarity here although at first glance, the *swadeshi* artists carry few connotations of the degenerate body that occupied the Symbolists. Nevertheless, the *swadeshi* artists' immersion in discussions about the Bengali physique and the body closely resemble ideas of degeneration offered in fin-de-siècle culture. While Mitter and Kapur's arguments for the influences in the idealised body are legitimate and useful pointers, they do not answer the question as to why the artist identified with the figural archetype of the one or the other.

In the first instance, one might offer a tentative explanation in the choice of medium. Ravi Varma's use of oils and canvas gave his figures a greater tactile presence, reinforcing the physicality of the body in his employment of illusionism. Not only the figures themselves, but the drapery and accoutrements all added to their lifelike presence. On the other hand, the *swadeshi* artists relied upon watercolours and soft washes for their desired ethereal effects, which effectively dematerialised the body. The emphasis on evanescent forms was in part because the *swadeshi* artists chose to repudiate Ravi Varma's brand of realism as an imitation of European ideas and offered a spiritual Indian idealism instead. What was implied in this understanding of idealism and how did it bear upon the body such that it was expressed through a renunciation of corporeality?

One way of thinking about the diminished body in the *swadeshi* archive is to place it within the context of characterisations of the 'feminised native' at the time. Late nineteenth century Bengal saw the emergence of a vigorous physical culture designed to counter the stereotype of the weak Bengali man, whose frail constitution was unable to defend the nation from the colonial aggressor. Nandalal Bose's early works distance themselves from this muscular culture and instead explore the possibility of rethinking the effeminate male body in emancipatory ways. Drawing upon models of transgendered bodies from historical and mythological narratives, Nandalal's works between 1905-1910 engage the delicate male body in heroic action that reclaims the moral authority for the native man. Further, the feminised heroic male figure is endowed with creative abilities, inaugurating a place for the arts in social transformation. The male body is accompanied by submissive female characters who assuage masculine anxiety about effeminacy with their subservience. Between 1910 and 1915, Nandalal explores a secondary theme of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) enshrined in the figure of the ascetic. As one who has shunned the pleasures of the flesh and devoted his energies to higher pursuits of the mind, the ascetic's mastery over his bodily desires, contested colonial depictions of the enslaved native body. In the following, I examine Nandalal's paintings between 1905-1915 as a specific response to the degenerate Bengali body in the popular imagination.

Masculine Anxiety and the Resignification of the Body

The study of the body as a site for the deployment of discourses of power has lent itself as a useful model in studying nationalism as an embodied practice rather than understanding it through the conceptual category of 'imagined communities' that was initially so influential.¹² As the locus of mechanisms of power, the body has reinscribed itself into the dialogue on nationalism most obviously in discussions of the sexed body, but also in studies on health and hygiene, disease and population. David Arnold has referred to the colonial occupation as a 'colonization of the body' set into motion by a massive bureaucratic operation aimed at surveying and controlling the population and its health, resources and productivity.¹³ Consequently, representations of the body and particularly its resignifications as introduced by the *swadeshi* artists, must be viewed in light of this institutional power of the colonial state, as reshaping the body politic. This colonisation of the body was most obviously reflected in visual representations of the human body as the hegemonic Greco-Roman frame displaced the 'much maligned monsters' of the Hindu pantheon.¹⁴ By the mid nineteenth century, the British had established art schools in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Lahore to teach 'correct' anatomical drawing to its

¹⁰ Geeta Kapur, 'Ravi Varma: Representational Dilemmas of a Nineteenth Century Indian Painter' *Journal of Arts and Ideas* No. 17-18, June 1989, p. 70.

¹¹ Mitter, *Art and Nationalism*, p. 279.

¹² See for instance the collection of essays edited by James H. Mills and Satadru Sen, *Confronting the Body: The Politics of Physicality in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Anthem Press: London, 2004). The seminal concept 'imagined communities' comes, of course, from Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso: London, New York, 1991).

¹³ David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Oxford University Press: Delhi, 1993).

¹⁴ Partha Mitter examines the European denunciation of the Hindu pantheon in *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago University Press: Chicago, 1992).

Indian students. Plastic casts of the *Aphrodite of Knidos* and the *Belvedere torso* were used as teaching aids and the late nineteenth century saw a host of academically trained artists churn out figures drawn from these classically inspired antique models. In 1889, the writer O.C. Menon attested to the popularity of such representations:

Before people here saw and began appreciating oil paintings of the kind that were done in Europe, they used to take pleasure in images of Narsimhamurthy [Vishnu as half-man half lion] that were impossible in reality ... representations of Srikrishnan standing with his legs twisted in a way that no ordinary biped could manage... Today many of those people have tired of such depictions and admire oil or water-colour paintings that depict people or animals or other things in their everyday form. The closer the artistic reproduction is to the natural model, the greater the honour and admiration for the artist.¹⁵

Reclaiming the body as a product of indigenous ideas and discourses formed an essential aspect of the nationalist effort to contest colonial power. In the early twentieth century, nationalist art historical writing felt constrained to explain the 'distortions' and 'exaggerations' of Indian sculpture and painting as inspired by Hindu principles, invoking Yoga and Vedantic thought to make their claims. Ananda Coomaraswamy hastened to explain the symbolism of the multiple arms of Indian gods and goddesses and Aurobindo Ghose felt compelled to respond to dismissals of Indian art as semi-savage on account of its incorporation of animal imagery.¹⁶ *Swadeshi* art's rejection of the anatomically accurate body of academic artists was therefore deeply implicated in the project to wrest control of the native body from colonial discourses. Its adoption of the attenuated figure by *swadeshi* art represented a powerful effort to resignify the body in terms of a new aesthetic that made alternative claims on the Indian body politic.

In Bengal, the colonial discourse on the native body coalesced around the figure of the 'effeminate Bengali', a familiar stereotype that held sway through the late nineteenth century in India.¹⁷ Among generalisations of the feminised native, the Bengali man was singled out for his debilitated physical frame. James Mill had distinguished between the 'manlier races' of Europe and "the weak and delicate frame of the Hindus" and this was confirmed by Social Darwinist ideas popular in Britain at the time.¹⁸ The critique tended to focus on the Bengali's physical constitution as an index of his subservient position: 'The Bengali's leg is either skin and bones...with round thighs like a woman's. The Bengali's leg is the leg of a slave.'¹⁹ After the 'Mutiny' of 1857, a classification of the Indian races by Lord Roberts, the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army between 1885-1893, differentiated between 'martial' races like the Sikhs and the Marathas and the effete Bengalis, who were excluded from joining the army.²⁰ Thomas Macaulay's critique has remained the most cited source on Bengali effeminacy:

the physical organization of the Bengali is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapour bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid. During many ages he has been trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardy breeds. Courage, independence, veracity, are qualities to which his constitution and his situation are equally unfavourable. His mind bears a singular analogy to his body. It is weak even to helplessness for purposes of manly resistance.²¹

¹⁵ O. Chandu Menon, *Indulekha*, trans. Anitha Devasia (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2005), p.239.

¹⁶ Ananda Coomaraswamy, 'Indian Images with Many Arms', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, vol. 22, no. 118 (Jan., 1913), pp. 189-96; Sri Aurobindo, 'Indian Art' *The Foundations of Indian Culture* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram: Pondicherry, 1971), pp. 196-254.

¹⁷ See Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1995), and Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 1983).

¹⁸ James Mill, *History of India*, vol. 2 (London: James Madden & Co., 1895), p.15

¹⁹ G. W. Steevens, *In India* (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1899) p. 73

²⁰ See Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004)

²¹ T.B. Macaulay, *Critical, Historical and Miscellaneous Essays and Poems*, Vol. 2 (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1880) pp. 566-7

During the partition of Bengal in 1905 by Lord Curzon and the widespread anti-colonial sentiment it raised, Bengalis themselves acknowledged such feelings of effeminacy as a sign of their inability to defend the land from the colonial aggressor.²² The *Hitavadi*, a popular Bengali daily bemoaned: “We are degenerated creatures devoid of manliness. That is why Lord Curzon’s despotism is flowing on in an uninterrupted discourse.”²³ A host of contemporary Bengali intellectuals and social leaders including Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Sarala Debi and Swami Vivekananda internalized such ideas in their writings, and mocked the enervated character of their countrymen. Sarala Debi, Rabindranath Tagore’s niece inaugurated the *Birashjami Utsab*, a festival dedicated to martial heroes with a taunt:

When some Hindusthani sees a Bengali being beaten by a fellow Hindusthani, he says, ‘Let him be! He’s only a Bengali!’ and instead of being fired with rage at the insult, the unfortunate darling remembers the utterances of his mother, his aunts and grandmother: ‘Oh our poor darling is so thin!’ – and he weeps in self-pity. When will our mothers teach their darlings to say like Lava, the son of Sita, ‘How dare you pity me!’²⁴

These accusations of effeminacy were used to rouse the public against the British, and Vivekananda exhorted his followers: “I want strength, manhood, *kshatravirya*, or the virility of a warrior, and *brahma-teja*, or the radiance of a Brahmin.”²⁵ It was believed that physical degeneration was the cause for the historical and cultural downfall of the Bengalis at the hands of the ‘superior’ British. Race and diet were forwarded as the reasons for the decline of the Indian civilization from the ‘manly independence’ of the early Aryans of India.²⁶ As a result, late nineteenth century Bengal saw several movements for recuperating masculinity emerge, including the building of *akharas* (gymnasias) and the flowering of secret terrorist societies. Between 1867 and 1880, the members of the Tagore family initiated the Hindu Mela, an annual fair aimed towards a cultural and physical regeneration of Bengali society. The Hindu Mela petered out by 1880 and through the 1890’s the pursuit of a nationalist physical culture drew inspiration from the militant movements of western India. Secret terrorist societies took part in the political agitations that accompanied the partition of Bengal in 1905, keeping alive the ties forged between nationalism and physical culture.

The colonial crisis in masculinity was particularly ingrained in the psyche of the Bengali *bhadralok* (middle class) who had a symbiotic relationship with the British elite. As products of a social class aspiring to English education and employment in judicial and government services, the Anglicised manners of the *bhadralok* were the object of much satire in magazine literature and popular imagery. The stereotype was embodied in the figure of the Bengali *babu* (Fig.3) – a dandy, who indulged in meat and alcohol and consorted with prostitutes. Kalighat prints from the late nineteenth century provide lively caricatures of the *babu* and his profligate lifestyle. A product of half digested western learning, the *babu*’s obsession with western fashion and manners drew scorn from commentators and painters. In short, he presented the very degenerate body and the absence of manly spirit bemoaned in contemporary culture. In the accompanying image, the *babu* dressed in an expensive *dhoti* and *kurta* shows off his immaculate attire, while ignoring his bankrupted home. The painting illustrates the Bengali proverb ‘*baire konchar patton, bhittore chhunchor ketton*’ meaning ‘while he adjusts his pleats outside, musk rats roam inside the house’.

The force of this image of effeminacy had been summoned in Ravi Varma paintings which made vivid images of the captive goddess as allegories for national servitude. In *Jatayuvadh* or *The Triumph of Inderjit*, to name just two, goddesses captured by demonic forces served to arouse public indignation. In each, a goddess-like figure personifying the nation is held imprisoned by a demon and the colonial threat is envisioned as an immoral sexual assault on the nation. *Swadeshi* images like Asit Haldar’s *His Heritage* on the other hand, offered the melancholic dispossessed hero brooding over his loss. The thinly veiled national allegory was

²² John Roselli, ‘The Self-Image of Effeminess: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal’ *Past and Present* No. 86, pp. 121-148

²³ *Hitavadi*, 28 July 1905 (Reports of the Native Newspapers, Bengal), no. 31, 1905, p.751

²⁴ Sarala Debi, ‘Bangali Paray’ [In a Bengali Locality] *Bharati*, September-October, 1903, p.618. Cited in Indira Chowdhury, *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Colonial Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.167, f.n, 56.

²⁵ Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1975), p. 197

²⁶ For an analysis of racial attitudes and the body see, Sudipta Sen ‘Colonial Aversions and Domestic Divides’ in *Sexual Sites: Seminal Attitudes: Sexualities, Masculinities and Culture in South Asia* Sanjay Srivastava (ed.) (Sage Publications: New Delhi, 2004) pp. 49-82

described as typifying “all regions where nature showers her gifts and joys but where, owing to political, social and economic causes, man decays and is unable to take possession of and enjoy his heritage.”²⁷ This plaintive lament figured on the passive man conveyed the *swadeshi* response to the emasculating politics of colonialism and echoed notions of degeneration in fin-de-siècle culture.

The *swadeshi* quest to resuscitate the degenerate native body was first posed in Abanindranath Tagore’s *Bharat Mata* (Fig.4), a painting that counter-intuitively proposed a disengagement with the corporeal, rather than the renewed focus on the physical body offered by the *akharas*. Painted in the wake of the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the ensuing anti-colonial sentiment, Tagore’s image was a clarion call to unite national interests under the image of a secularized goddess holding out food, clothing, spiritual knowledge and secular learning – *anna*, *vastra*, *siksa* and *diksa*. It was typically asexual with the goddess wearing a monk’s robes, her halo and the lotus flowers at her feet underlining the purity of her mission. Abanindranath’s use of the wash technique further dissolved her figure so that the body appears to lack mass, floating against an amorphous background. Her slender body is fully covered, breasts and hips safely wrapped under her garments.³

Tagore’s image inaugurated the new ideal for the female body favoured by the *swadeshi* artists. It was instantly hailed by an influential community of nationalist art historians comprising Sister Nivedita and Ananda Coomaraswamy amongst others, as a landmark.²⁸ Vivekananda had already prescribed such a role for the Indian woman declaring: “Woman! Thou shalt not be coupled with anything connected with the flesh. Thy name has been called holy once and for ever, for what name is there which no lust can ever approach, no carnality ever come near, than the one word mother? That is the ideal in India.”²⁹ Sister Nivedita gushed over the painting exclaiming:

We have here a picture which bids fair to prove the beginning of a new age in Indian art... This is the first masterpiece, in which an Indian artist has actually succeeded in disengaging, as it were, the spirit of the motherland... giver of all good, yet eternally virgin.³⁰

Nivedita had emerged as an authoritative mentor amidst the *swadeshi* artists. Aligning herself with the nationalist cause she claimed that only the defeated were capable of great art: “An imperialised people have nothing to struggle for, and without the struggle there can be no great genius, no great poetry.”³¹ She represented an interesting confluence of interests from her background in the Arts and Crafts Movement and her dedication to the cause of a pan-Asian ideal, having penned the introduction to Kakuzo Okakura’s *Ideals of the East* (1904). Her comments on gender in the works of *swadeshi* artists are significant not only because they reflect a strain of Victorian puritanism that was able to resonate across to the Bengali artists, but also because of her influence on Nandalal Bose. Bose recalls his admiration for her opinions in his later writings.³²

Nivedita’s praise for the virgin goddess expressed Victorian ideals of female purity tied to the figure of the nun, whose renunciation of sexuality rendered her the epitome of female virtue and sacrifice. This apotheosis of the woman into a paragon untouched by the ‘sin of sex’ rendered her morally superior, but inevitably left her physically frailer. Based around the vestal purity of the nun, Bram Dijkstra has catalogued Victorian female prototypes with delicate wispy bodies including ‘the collapsing woman’, ‘the nymph with the broken back’ or ‘the weightless woman’ with hollow-cheeked faces and vacant eyes fading into consumptive nothingness.³³ Abanindranath Tagore’s gesture inaugurates a similar moment in Indian painting as the broad-hipped female figure dissolves into a shadow of her previous self, a canonization that demands of her a sacrifice of her body.

²⁷ *Chatterjee’s Picture Album*, No. 2, Calcutta, 1919.

²⁸ Coomaraswamy wrote an allegorical essay based upon the painting. ‘Mata-Bharata’ *Essays in National Idealism* (Munshilal Manoharlal: New Delhi, 1981) p. 14-16. It was first published in *The Modern Review* April 1907, pp. 369-71.

²⁹ Swami Vivekananda, “Indian Woman Versus Western Woman” in *Our Women* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1961), p.17

³⁰ Sister Nivedita, ‘Bharat Mata’, CWSN, p. 57.

³¹ Sister Nivedita, “The Function of Art in Shaping Nationality” CWSN p. 13.

³² Nandalal Bose, *Vision and Creation*, trans. K.G. Subramanyan (Viswa Bharati Publishing Department: Calcutta, 1999) p. 262.

³³ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford University Press: New York and Oxford, 1986)

Recent discussions have elaborated the class divisions that guided such portrayals of chastity.³⁴ Whereas a wider set of sexual freedoms were granted to the 'woman of the street', Victorian upper and middle class attitudes to respectable female sexuality guided the moralities of the *bhadralok*. Upper class female sexuality was to be regulated within the domestic spaces of the home in keeping with Victorian ideals of the 'angel of the house.' Sumanta Banerjee suggests the inculcation of Victorian moral prescriptions ultimately resulted in new attitudes towards the body: 'The new bodily canon prohibited all descriptions or expressions that were linked with eating, the sex act, pregnancy, childbirth, etc.'³⁵ Parallel prescriptions obtained for men and Ashis Nandy points out how lower-class Victorian men were expected to enact their manliness by demonstrating sexual prowess while the upper classes affirmed their masculinity through sexual distance, abstinence and control and that the latter found affinity with Brahmanical asceticism.³⁶

Male Creativity and Female Reproductivity

Between 1905 and 1910, Nandalal Bose was closely associated with the activities of the *swadeshi* movement as Bengali nationalists responded to the partition of Bengal with a call for civil disobedience. At this early stage of his career, Nandalal seldom invoked secular themes or indeed common, everyday subjects for his pictorial compositions; the interest lay in representing historical and mythological figures, an aspect that marks a continuity with earlier artists like Ravi Varma.³⁷ At the Government School of Art, Abanindranath Tagore had introduced the study of Indian mythology as a necessary part of the curriculum and even appointed a pundit to narrate the epics to the students. There was simultaneously a wider interest in the poetic and allegorical qualities of Hindu mythology that Coomaraswamy and Nivedita had attempted to explore in their book, *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* (1913) using the mythological narrative as an example of the shared heritage of the Indian people. During this period, Bose invokes mythological figures to re-envision the male hero as creatively endowed, while situating female characters within the familiar poles of the self-sacrificing companion and the perverse woman.

One of Nandalal Bose's earliest paintings (executed between 1905-7) is an image of Arjuna disguised as a female dancer in the court of Virata. In the story from the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna was cursed by the celestial goddess Urvashi, who fell in love with him but was spurned by Arjuna. Urvashi cursed him to become a dancer amongst women, devoid of honour and regarded as a *kliba*, an impotent man. Indra softened the curse, reducing the term to one year after which he would be a man again. Arjuna offered his services as *kliba* when the Pandavas were in exile during their year in disguise and taught dance to the women in the harem of king Viraat. The story promised that the Pandavas would return to claim their throne following the successful period of exile in disguise. This narrative of exile-in-disguise (*agyaat vaas*) served an important role in rousing nationalist sentiment in many of Ravi Varma's paintings and also in a play in Western India, *KeechakVadh*.³⁸ Against the dominant view of the effeminate Bengali, Nandalal Bose's image is unusual in presenting the feminised character in a positive light. Nandalal draws Arjuna as a graceful dancer clad in flowing robes teaching dance to the women of the court. The promised return to manhood at the end of the exile period made the cross dressing Arjuna less an endorsement of effeminacy than a necessity to be endured for deliverance from the contemporary state of affairs. Wendy Doniger notes that Arjuna's presentation in drag does nothing to undermine his virility, in fact it can emphasise it for the audience, as performance.³⁹ Nandalal presents the effeminate Arjuna as a performing artist, and the continuity between femininity and the creative arts that is announced here persists as a theme in his works.

³⁴ Prominent among these include: Ratnabali Chatterjee 'Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Bengal: Construction of Class and Gender' *Social Scientist*, Vol. 21, No. 9/11, Sep.- Oct., 1993) pp. 159-72; Tapan Raychaudhuri, 'Love in a Colonial Climate: Marriage, Sex and Romance in Nineteenth Century Bengal' *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 34, No. 2, May 2000, pp 349-78; Tanika Sarkar, 'A Book of her Own. A Life of her Own: Autobiography of a Nineteenth Century Woman', *History Workshop Journal*, No. 36, Autumn, 1993. pp.35-66

³⁵ Sumanta Banerjee, 'Bogey of the Bawdy: Changing Concept of Obscenity in 19th Century Bengali Culture' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 22, No. 29, July 18 1987, pp. 1197-1206.

³⁶ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, p.10

³⁷ As explanation Bose later said: 'Born in a Hindu family...I made paintings of gods and goddesses. Now I make paintings of divinities as well as facts of common life; I try to derive equal delight from both. I used to think that imagined visions of divinities are higher in kind than images of ordinary things; now I know better. I am not concerned with these hierarchies anymore...I used to formerly see the divine on the images of divinities alone; now I see it in the images of men, trees and mountains.' Nandalal Bose 'The Art Pursuit' *Vision and Creation*, p.18.

³⁸ See Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods* (New Delhi: Oxford university Press, 2004) pp. 68-71

³⁹ Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1999) p. 281.

Bose develops the idea of male creativity in a story that bears some resemblance to the Pygmalion myth in *Ahalya* (Fig.5). The story tells the tale of a beautiful woman punished for her sexual liaison with Indra outside her marriage to the sage Gautama Maharishi who cursed turned her into a block of stone. In Tulsidas's version of the *Ramayana*, Ram and Lakshman, became aware of her plight during their exile in the jungle and persuaded the sage to let them see her. As they touched the stone with their feet, the statue came to life in the form of the beautiful Ahalya. In the version in the *Padma Purana*, Ahalya was punished to become 'dried up and bodiless...a mere image (of a woman) made of bones' and Gautama's curse deprived her of her body.⁴⁰ Nandalal's painting of Ahalya portrays the moment that Ram and Lakshman arrive as Ahalya sits penitent and imprisoned within a block of stone praying devoutly. She is rewarded for her penitence by the heroic man who possesses the magic to bring her to life. Nandalal's painting was included in the third exhibition of the Indian Society for Oriental Art held in 1910, a venue that was beginning to achieve much respect within the circles of avant-garde *swadeshi* art. Nivedita responded to it in glowing terms:

one of the finest achievements of its gifted artist. Whether we look at the petrified woman, or the sage [Vasishta], or at the youthful heroes, we carry away the same impression; thus it must have been, for it could not have been so beautiful otherwise. To produce such an impression is a great triumph for an artist of any age and experience.⁴¹

Nandalal Bose's rendition of the Pygmalion myth relies not so much upon the idealisation of the female form or male narcissism that western feminism has singled out in its analyses, but rather upon the miraculous act of releasing the woman from her incarceration. In view of the popular allegorical rendering of the nation in captivity, it could very well have served to convey the wish for independence. The incarcerated woman found ample visual expression in Indian nationalist painting, typically in Sita's captivity, which was depicted in both Ravi Varma's paintings (*Jatayuvadh*) as well as in Abanindranath Tagore's works (*Sita in Captivity*). However, in Nandalal's *Ahalya*, the manner of its enactment specifically celebrates the man's creative potential vis-à-vis the incarcerated woman. The fantasy of the immured woman awaiting the liberating action of the man had wide currency in Victorian painting. J.E. Millais's painting *The Knight Errant* (1870) was a typical example where the gallant medieval knight cut the ropes of the naked woman, underlining male moral agency dedicated to saving the woman. Male agency here usurps Ahalya's sexual and creative capacity transforming her into a chaste virginal figure while endowing the heroic man with the capacity of (re)creating life. The image therefore also serves as an allegory on the artist and his artwork, where the artist's act of (re)creation is commemorated ironically by disavowing the woman's sexual and reproductive potential. Rescuing Ahalya grants agency to the man re-affirming his masculinity and since this is a direct result of his ability to create, it announces a continuum between creativity and manliness not unlike the paradigm of masculinity witnessed with Victorian Pre-Raphaelites painters.⁴² Nivedita nevertheless castigated Nandalal for the male figures in *Ahalya*, claiming they verged on the feminine: 'nobly-born and beautiful women might feel and look as much. We miss the distinctively masculine touch. We want the man who is a man, and could never, in his untamed and irrepressible strength be anything else.'⁴³ Although it is impossible to establish his inner motives, it was soon after that Nandalal abandoned his delicate male figures and experimented with other modes of rendering masculinity, turning towards expressions of *brahmacharya*.

The inversion of female reproductivity that Nandalal invokes in *Ahalya* belongs to a wider *swadeshi* concern with the perverse sexuality of the evil woman. Abanindranath Tagore and his student Samarendranath Gupta both presented images of the Mauryan king, Ashoka's queen, Tissarakshita. Jealous of her husband's devotion to the Bodhi tree, she cast a spell, causing it to wither away. In Tagore's version, (Fig. 6) Tissa is presented as an evil, scheming woman very similar to Nandalal's image of *Kaikeyi* (1908), the manipulative heroine of the *Ramayana*. The theme of the *salabhanjika*, or the *yakshi* whose touch caused trees to blossom is perverted in this story of a woman who causes the tree to die instead. Tissa sits separated from the *kalasha* or the ritual pot with its promises of bounty, her deathly gaze directed at the tree. The seamless organic metaphors of fertility

⁴⁰ Doniger, p. 93.

⁴¹ Sister Nivedita, 'Ahalya' CWSN, p. 71.

⁴² See Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1995).

⁴³ Sister Nivedita, 'Ahalya' p. 71.

between woman and nature that were an aspect of the *yakshi* figure are inverted so that woman's sexual and reproductive potential is not only rendered sterile but deadly.⁴⁴ It is worth noting the stele with the hooded snake upon which she rests her hand, a reference perhaps to the Naga cult that worshipped serpents. In this context however, it more likely recalls the popular archetype of the *Vish-Kanya* or the 'poison-damsel', a variation of the modern *femme fatale*.⁴⁵ Tagore places Tissa against a railing with medallions resembling those from the stupa at Bharhut, whose architectural specimens had been recently transferred to the Indian Museum in Calcutta in 1875-76. Both the *salabhanjika* and the Bodhi tree were prominent motifs in the Bharhut remains, however the structure referenced here appears not to reference a specific stupa, but a composite form evoking an idealised Buddhist shrine.⁴⁶

In *Ahalya*, Nandalal's submissive model of femininity serves in contrast to the dominant vengeful goddess of *Shaktha* worship popular in Bengal. Kalighat paintings, on the other hand, had continued with the tradition of portraying powerful women often shown trampling their husbands, an indication perhaps of class differences.⁴⁷ In Nandalal Bose's world of the *bhadralok*, domesticity is posited as the space for the wife's willing surrender to her husband.⁴⁸ In *Gandhari*, (c.1907) Nandalal portrays the character from the *Mahabharata* who had willingly chosen to blindfold herself to keep her blind husband Dhritarashtra company. In Nandalal's female heroines the woman's body, in this case her sight, is sacrificed. The twin pillars of purity and sacrifice with which feminine ideals were invoked came together in Nandalal's painting of *Sati* (1907). Nivedita specifically lauded Nandalal's painting of *sati* as a glorious symbol of Hindu womanhood.⁴⁹ His image bathes the kneeling woman in a glow as her flimsy form is overcome by the flames – not the vicious crackling flames of a consuming fire but a mellow saffron wash of colours that is almost sinister in its inviting aestheticism.⁵⁰ The subject of widespread debate, *sati* was also explained in writings by Ananda Coomaraswamy as a sacrosanct act that distinguished the noble, selfless Hindu woman.⁵¹ While I will not rehearse the voluminous contemporary scholarship on *sati* here, what was significant regarding the practice was that it was celebrated as immortalising the woman as goddess.⁵² The literal dematerialisation of the body as it passed through the fires of purification rendered *sati* a particularly potent theme for the depiction of femininity around purity and sacrifice.

Asceticism and Masculine Poetics

Although the attenuated figure of *swadeshi* art saw both male and female forms physically diminished by the new style, the sacrifice of the female body reflected a very different set of concerns than its male counterpart. Revolving largely around questions of sexuality, the fantasies of the willing surrender of the female body were attempts to contain women's desire within the patterns of safe docile behaviour. The mythological narratives from the *Puranas* including the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, influential amongst *swadeshi* artists and writers, included several accounts of a female sexuality incompatible with the new ideals of chastity and innocence popular in Victorian models. The transformation of the more promiscuous characters from the *Pauranic* narratives into the chaste goddesses preferred by the *swadeshi* artists worked in conjunction with the

⁴⁴ Another well-known contemporary source on woman's perverse sexuality that adopted the same metaphor was Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Poison Tree* (1884), a tale about the misguided desires of a young widow.

⁴⁵ The *Mudra Rakshasa* describes the use of the *Vish Kanyas* against war enemies during the Mauryan Empire. See Norman Mosley Penser, *Poison-Damsels and Other Essays in Folklore and Anthropology* (London: Privately Printed for C.J. Sawyer, 1952) pp. 12-17.

⁴⁶ I am indebted to Tamara Sears for this identification.

⁴⁷ Kalighat images paint innumerable scenes of the assertive wife trampling upon the husband, beating him with a broom or relegating his familial obligations secondary to her own interests. While this may appear as evidence for her dominant role within familial structures, in fact, it served as social criticism of the 'unnaturalness' of such behaviour. A Bat-tala print by Nrityalal Dutta that shows the husband carrying his wife on his back and dragging his mother by a chain is titled *Ghor Koli*, a reference to the terrible times ushered in by the entitled wife.

⁴⁸ Tanika Sarkar compellingly reads such an ideal of martyred companionship in the home as compensating for the male colonial subject's lack of autonomy in the public sphere. Tanika Sarkar, 'The Hindu Wife and the Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal' *Studies in History* No. 8, 1992, pp. 213-35.

⁴⁹ Sister Nivedita, 'Notes on Painting' *The Modern Review*, April 1908, pp. 369-70.

⁵⁰ Interestingly, Bose's 1907 version has a lighter tone and palette that tends to romanticize the act; the later version from 1947 uses harsher colours that render the flames more lurid. The first version is available only from a reproduction and could reflect printing inconsistencies.

⁵¹ Ananda Coomaraswamy, 'Status of Indian Women' *The Dance of Siva* (Dover Publications: New York, 1985) pp. 82-102.

⁵² Some of the more prominent sources on *sati* are Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India' *Recasting Women* (eds.) Kunkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 1990) pp. 88-126; Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (Routledge: London and New York, 1993) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak' *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (eds.) Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 1988) pp. 271-313.

new ideals of asceticism that were revived in Bengali culture around the turn of the century. Unregulated female sexuality threatened to disrupt the resolve of abstinence that formed the cornerstone of the principles of *brahmacharya* and the ascetic's predominant concern with managing his desire.

The dangers of female sexuality presented a constant source of anxiety, one that is best exhibited in Ravi Varma's image of *Viswamitra and Menaka* (Fig. 7). Sent by the gods to disrupt the sage Viswamitra's meditations, Menaka coyly attempts to seduce the ascetic with her charms. Viswamitra looks heavenward for deliverance from Menaka, steadfastly denying her presence even as his body contorts in an acknowledgement of her powerful sexuality. Viswamitra's attempts at disciplining his bodily desires were not very successful and the liaison resulted in the birth of Shakuntala. The investment in the figure of the *brahmacharya* by nationalist art and politics reflected exactly such an anxiety about disciplining and managing male desire and by implication, female sexuality. It was through the proper disciplining of male desire in the figure of the *brahmachari* (ascetic) that the male body was resuscitated from its emasculated state and claims to nationhood were posed.

Nandalal Bose drew not only from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* but also stories of saints popular within Bengal. While Mughal subject matter as well the life of Buddha were common themes in the *swadeshi* corpus, between 1910-1914, Bose focused largely on Hindu mythological figures experimenting with the figure of the *brahmachari* in various modes. At first, the *brahmachari* was introduced through sensual portraits of a solitary figure withdrawn from the world. Later, the ascetic is recalled through Shiva and in this, the slender form and sensual treatment is replaced by a firm, well-modelled masculine body with a deeply introspective visage. The transition between the two offered differing notions of masculinity. The early images dwell upon the Vaishnava ideal of Chaitanya as the effeminate Radha pining for Krishna, while the Shiva images recall him in his guise as the supreme ascetic.

An image of a mendicant (Fig. 8) by Nandalal that was used as the frontispiece to Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali and Fruit Gathering* (1918) presents the prototypical ascetic who has renounced worldly life. Clothed in the tattered garments and holy beads of a wandering ascetic, Nandalal romantically resurrects the figure of the Vaishnava minstrel who was a common figure in the Bengali countryside. Contemporary Kalighat paintings had lampooned the priest as a hypocrite, one who maintained a veneer of religiosity while falling prey to lust and corruption. Nandalal's portrait of the mendicant finds sanctity in the figure, showing him deeply absorbed in his music and lost to the external world. With his *ektara*, the single stringed instrument he carries and the *ghunghroo* (bells) on his ankles, he resembles the dancing dervish popularised in Sufi accounts. The paintings of a feminised Chaitanya that would follow were drawn from this mould.

The Tagores had a deep interest in Gaudiya Vaishnavism, as the cult of Chaitanya in Bengal was called, and Rabindranath Tagore's early collection of poems *Bhanusingher Padabali* (1875) adopted the manner of medieval Vaishnava poets. Abanindranath Tagore's first self-conscious 'Indian' image was an illustration of a Vaishnava *padabali* (lyrical poem) by Govindadas. Moreover, as Debashish Banerji has noted, Abanindranath Tagore's elaboration of an indigenous aesthetic revolving around *bhava* (emotive content) and *rasa* (beauty) was based upon an aestheticised Vaishnava ideology.⁵³ Chaitanya appears to have been a popular subject among the *swadeshi* artists - Kshitindranath Majumdar had painted an early version of Chaitanya with a devotee, continuing with the theme late into his career, Priyanath Sinha had a version, and Gaganendranath Tagore had painted an entire series on the life of Chaitanya (c.1910-14), which was exhibited as part of an early tour of Bengali *swadeshi* art in London in 1914.

Nandalal's Chaitanya (Fig.9) however was a withdrawn, contemplative monk-like character who nevertheless held out the possibility of social action. Chaitanya's devotion to Krishna was often thematised through his personification as Radha and several devotional songs portray him as Krishna's lover, pining in separation. Chaitanya is depicted as a languid saint reclining against a *Garuda stambha* (a pillar with Garuda capital), his eyes heavy with longing.⁵⁴ The garment covering the lower body of Chaitanya is notably not saffron, the

⁵³ Debashish Banerji, 'Havell, Abanindranath, Nandalal: Towards a Utopic Postmodern Culture' *Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose* (San Diego Museum of Art: San Diego, 2008) p. 63.

⁵⁴ The *Garuda-stambha* was a pillar at the Jaganath temple in Puri where Chaitanya was said to have stood to get a darshan of the God. A replica of the *stambha* had recently been acquired by the Tagores at Jorasanko in their effort to redecorate the house with 'Oriental art', rather than the Victorianised oil paintings that had dominated its aesthetics earlier.

accepted colour of renunciation for ascetics, but a rich, silken cloth. Nandalal first painted this image between 1910 and 14, but the first version of the painting was destroyed in a shipping accident and it is available only from a copy done by Nandalal himself in the 1940s. Nandalal continued with images of Chaitanya in his later years, including *Birth of Chaitanya* (1931) and *Chaitanya with Haridas* (1942) testifying to his continued engagement with the theme.

Nandalal's sensual treatment of Chaitanya is drawn from his experience at Ajanta however, he also uses the popularity of the tales surrounding Chaitanya in Bengal to seek legitimacy for his effeminate male characters. While the image of Arjuna as *kliba* had allowed for a temporary impersonation, Chaitanya's feminised self looked towards an authorisation from complex Gaudiya Vaishnava performative practices where the followers mimic Radha seeking union with Krishna as a mode of divine salvation.⁵⁵ In this state of impersonation, the followers play many roles, that of a servant, friend, elder or lover to Krishna, the last one being the most popular. Chaitanya's impersonation as Radha presented him as the ultimate form of the divine: Radha and Krishna in one body.⁵⁶ And yet, Chaitanya is a *brahmachari*, one who has renounced sex.

The notion of the *brahmachari* was extended in Nandalal's paintings on the Pandavas in boyhood or of the young Eklavya that illustrated Coomaraswamy and Nivedita's *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists*. In Hindu thought, *brahmacharya* typically represented the phase before marriage, where the early years were to be spent in strict celibacy under the tutelage of a spiritual teacher, or *guru*. There is, in these paintings, a spirit of a male brotherhood that permeates the spaces, as Nandalal recreates the *gurukul* and the *guru*, Drona. It was within such a space of a masculine communitarian poetics that Nandalal envisioned his own project and indeed this had parallels in Bose's own artistic community. Nandalal's tutelage under the Tagores had evolved into a close working relationship and by 1911 the Jorasanko household of the Tagores doubled as a studio for art students where Nandalal Bose and other boys from the Calcutta School of Art would come and work during the day. Nandalal's woodcut print of the Jorasanko studio (Fig.10) presents the studio as a casual space where work and leisure blend seamlessly into each other. In this den surrounded with works of art on the walls, Coomaraswamy reaches out to point to a painting by Nandalal Bose as the Tagores lounge around reading and smoking the hookah.⁵⁷ And although we know of several women with professional interests in the coterie of the Tagores including Sunaina Devi, Sarala Debi and Sister Nivedita, Nandalal paints a purely homosocial space of a salon, where men of letters converse and share ideas on art and literature. It is intriguing that Nandalal resists idealizing the actual artists and perhaps one may see in this a sign of modesty and resistance to identifying wholly between heroic representations and themselves, but the image remains no doubt an indication of the brotherhood he would have liked the wider audience to see of the Jorasanko studio. The new medium (the pen and ink sketch of the original) may have contributed to the realism of the image, but what is pertinent here is the artistic space drawn in line with the *gurukul* paintings he had also made. An example of a more formal painting where Nandalal displays portly male bodies is *Jagai and Madhai* (c.1907-8), which depicts two characters from the stories based around the life of Chaitanya. Jagai and Madhai were drunken brothers who were eventually drawn into the fold of Chaitanya's teachings. Nandalal paints the brothers as corpulent, with fleshy bellies and lounging on the ground in their drunken state and I would argue that it was precisely the non-heroic character of the individuals portrayed that allowed Nandalal to depict them as obese and rotund. Corpulence was equated with a kind of debasement by the Kalighat artists in their satires of the Vaishnava priests depicted as fat and

⁵⁵ See David Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation: A Study of Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana* (Oxford University Press: New York and Oxford, 1988). Haberman also argues that the medieval valorization of Krishna in his role as lover over the previous ideal of the *cakravartin* (hero-king), was a result of the political loss of center to Muslim dominance and encouraged a Hindu shift to a mytho-religious world of meaning transcending the political order. This has many obvious parallels in the colonial context with the loss of the political realm to the British. The performative roles adopted by Gaudiya Vaishnavas allowed for the possibility of identity transformation and permitted them to mediate between their sociopolitical roles and their 'ideal selves as informed by their Hindu heritage' p. 44.

⁵⁶ In medieval Vaishnavism, this reflected the highest ideal. See Edward C. Dimock Jr., 'Doctrine and Practice among Vaishnavas in Bengal' *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*. (ed.) Milton Singer (Chicago University Press: Chicago, 1971) pp. 41-63. Sumanta Banerjee claims that the transition from the medieval beliefs regarding Radha and Krishna sharing the same body to male transvestism in later years (the male pretending to be Radha) left the woman without any independent role in society as Radha loses her identity 'submerged in a relationship that reflects the patriarchal Brahmanical hegemony which asserted itself in the post-Chaitanya phase of Gaudiya Vaishnavism.' Sumanta Banerjee, *Appropriation of a Folk Heroine: Radha in Medieval Bengali Vaishnavite Culture* (Indian Institute of Advanced Studies: Shimla, 1993) p. 45.

⁵⁷ A pen and ink sketch served as the original and was most likely produced between 1909-1910, but was lost in the 1950s during the production of a memorial volume on Coomaraswamy. The image exists only from a woodcut print from the 1920s.

ridiculous.⁵⁸ Bose also provides an element of caricature in their podgy bellies and debauched bodies rendered in the sharp contours afforded by pen and ink drawing.

The *brahmachari* paintings had largely continued with the earlier strategy of infusing effeminate male bodies with the potential for heroic action. However, later and most predominantly in a painting of Shiva, Nandalal Bose explores more fully the ascetic ideal as a symbol for masculine strength. The choice of Shiva is telling in that he is the prototypical figure of the ascetic and marks an investment in another notion of masculinity, beyond the sensuous Vaishnava depictions of Chaitanya. In colonial Bengal, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's landmark novel *Ananda Math* (1882) had imbued the figure of the ascetic with a revolutionary fervour and Swami Vivekananda's reformulation saw the *sannyasi* (ascetic) engaged in political transformation.⁵⁹ Vivekananda envisaged the role of the *sannyasi* as a heroic figure whose abstinence rendered him more virile, thereby contesting colonial notions of masculinity. In Joseph Alter's writings on colonial India, male concern with celibacy feeds directly into the moral politics of nationalism by providing an alternative model of virility where sexual control is valorised as a mark of strength.⁶⁰

In Nandalal's rendering of *Shiva Drinking the World's Poison* (Fig. 11) (1910-1915), it is exactly such a virile god that is celebrated. The heroic god is seated in twisted perspective with a halo around his head, cupping his hand to drink. The story narrated the tale of the churning of the world's waters by the gods and the demons and Shiva's rescuing of the world by drinking all the poison. The superhuman act of the masculinised deity is accordingly depicted in a sculpturesque form that grants a greater sense of volume to the body. The shift in style has been attributed to a maturation of Nandalal's Ajanta influence that encouraged him to modify the earlier attenuation of the figure. Here, it is equally representative of a heroic masculinity as a counterpart to the submissive feminine ideal offered by Nandalal. Shiva's ingestion of poison is testament to his physical strength, his masculine potency, leaving only a faint blue mark on his throat in Nandalal's rendition of the event. The body's ability to withstand poison is celebrated, in the manner of the true yogi who could drink poison like nectar.⁶¹ The uncanny resemblance of this image of Shiva with another image of Parthasarathy (Krishna as Arjuna's charioteer, to whom the *Bhagwad Gita* is narrated) is striking – both represent heroic action. Yet they are infused with a stillness that speaks of the disciplining of the body commanded by the ascetic that allows him to achieve great action.⁶²

Nandalal Bose's investment in a celibate hero locates him within the Hindu tradition of *brahmacharya* and its claims to moral authority. As studies on celibacy have shown, this does not preclude a notion of virility; in fact a fundamental connection between virility and heroism and strength is indicated in the asceticism of Shiva.⁶³ Wendy Doniger explains:

The contrast between the erotic and ascetic tradition in the character of Siva is not the 'conjunction of opposites' with which it has so often been confused. *Tapas* (asceticism) and *kama* (desire) are not diametrically opposed like black and white, or heat and cold, where the complete presence of one automatically implies the absence of the other. They are in fact two forms of heat, *tapas* being the potentially destructive or creative fire that the ascetic generates within himself, *kama* the heat of desire.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Ratnabali Chatterjee, *From the Karkhana to the Studio* (New Delhi: Books and Books, 1990), p. 67.

⁵⁹ For an analysis of the popularity of asceticism in Bengal, see Indra Chowdhury, *The Frail Hero and Virile* pp. 120 – 149.

⁶⁰ Joseph S. Alter, 'Celibacy, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Gender into Nationalism in North India' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 53, No.1, Feb., 1994, pp. 45-66.

⁶¹ Wendy Doniger O' Flaherty, *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic* (Oxford University Press: London, 1973) p. 279.

⁶² Krishna Chaitanya's interpretation of *Shiva Drinking the World's Poison* fails to detect the potential for heroic action in the painting, deeming it a failure: 'These are poetic ideas of great power which are just not realized, not even suggested, in the painting. It seems to present a man drinking a cup of tea.' Krishna Chaitanya, *A History of Indian Painting* p. 214.

⁶³ See for example O' Flaherty, *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic*. There is also a wide body of scholarship on asceticism and masculinity in colonial culture. Two sources which engage with asceticism and its implications for sexuality in nationalist politics include Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) pp. 123-158 and Milind Wakankar, 'Body, Crowd, Identity: Genealogy of a Hindu Nationalist Ascetics,' *Social Text* 45, Winter 1995, 45-73.

⁶⁴ Wendy Doniger O' Flaherty, *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic* p. 35.

This strategy of contesting aggressive masculinity through physical restraint had parallels in the monastic discourse of the Victorian pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. In exploring the cloistered religious life as a space for artistic manhood, the pre-Raphaelite artists formed a close club of male members sharing a mode of managing male desire that saw continuities between sexual potency and artistic creativity.⁶⁵ The *swadeshi* artists drew inspiration from both sources, laying claim to the ideal of the *brahmacharya* revived in nationalist discussions by leaders like Swami Vivekananda and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee as well to an artistic practice that had parallels in Victorian artists like Edward Burne-Jones.⁶⁶

In recent years, the muscular male body in representations like calendar art has come under scrutiny, as a sign of an aggressive body associated with the bellicose politics of Hindu nationalism. Anuradha Kapur's influential essay on contemporary representations of Rama initiated the discussion and Phillip Lutgendorf and others have continued with examinations of the muscular body and *Hindutva* politics.⁶⁷ While the muscular male body may indeed make claims to a chauvinistic masculinity, the androgynous body of the *swadeshi* artists appears no less dedicated to the cause of a resurgent masculinity. Moreover, it is not in the realm of popular visual culture and bazaar art alone that such an aggressive masculinity is posed. The corpus of canonical modern Indian art offers many examples as well, aligned closely with a reinterpretation of Hindu ideals. The exclusion of the *swadeshi* archive in the recent scrutiny surrounding muscular bodies tends to reaffirm *swadeshi* art as a rarefied aesthetic sphere far removed from the crass politics of Hindu nationalism. However, as I have argued, these early *swadeshi* images reveal a more complex scenario, where early nationalist engagement with modern Indian art found sanctuary in the androgynous male body, which functioned as a crucial node around which male desire, female bodies and a romanticized notion of art coalesced.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ See, Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*.

⁶⁶ Ananda Coomaraswamy's affiliation with William Morris and his own interest in reviving pre-modern artistic practices led him to frequently invoke the works of the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly Edward Burne-Jones. See for instance, 'Aims and Methods of Indian Art' first published in 1908 and reprinted in *Essays in National Idealism* (Munshilal Manoharlal: New Delhi, 1981) pp. 25-27. Coomaraswamy's high praise for Burne-Jones and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was likely conveyed to the *swadeshi* artists.

⁶⁷ Anuradha Kapur, 'Deity to Crusader: The Changing Iconography of Ram' *Hindus and Others: The Question of Identity in India Today*, P.K. Datta (ed.) (Viking: Delhi, 1993) pp. 74-109 and Philip Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey* (Oxford University Press, Oxford; New York, 2007). Kajri Jain has extended the discussion on the muscularity of devotional figures to popular cinema. See note. 9.

⁶⁸ I would like to express my thanks to all who have offered comments on this article, including Tamara Sears, Romita Ray, Tom Williams and the anonymous reader at the *Oxford Art Journal*. Zainab Bahrani and R. Siva Kumar's inputs were specially invaluable.