

# Ascetic Nationalism in Bankimchandra Chatterjee's "Anandamath": An Analysis

## Abstract

Asceticism has been ingrained in the Indian tradition as a way of life devoid of luxuries and all other expectations in which its adherents are expected to live a life of penance and severe austerities. The concept of nationalism which has evolved only in recent times did not bear the same connotations in India during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries because of the multiple principalities that ruled over large areas of the country. As a country therefore, India was not a nation in the true sense of the term as we understand it today. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Anandamath* (1882) weaves the twin concepts of asceticism and nationalism into the texture of the novel and the author can be said to be a pioneer in this regard. When the concept of nationalism was a far cry, Chatterjee explored its various dimensions under a rallying song *Bande Mataram* which eulogised India as a mother. The song in fact went on to infuse hundreds of freedom fighters to fight against colonial rule and became the national song of India. *Anandamath* narrates a gripping saga of pain, suffering, renunciation and patriotic fervour and the novel by portraying ascetics as torchbearers of nationalism has carved a unique place for itself in India's literary canon.

This paper is an attempt to portray the overtly nationalistic fervour displayed in the novel by a group of ascetics as evident in the English translation by Basanta Koomar Roy.

**Keywords:** Ascetic, Nationalism, Sannyasis, Mother India, Rebellion.

## Introduction

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the word 'ascetic' as 'a person who practices severe self-discipline and abstains from all forms of pleasure, especially for religious or spiritual reasons'. An ascetic is therefore expected to observe the strictest of norms in the pursuance of a goal marked by abstinence from material pleasures. It is also possible to deduce from the definition that there is a goal or attainment that is to be achieved, attached to the concept. Ascetics pursue a goal through severe tests and difficulties in the realization of a religious or spiritual end. In the Indian context asceticism can be construed as a philosophy in which renunciation of all worldly pleasures is supposed to yield a sort of bliss, a nirvana of sorts. This bliss uplifts the soul to a different state of being beyond the infinite, at one with the great world of nature. Over the centuries, hermits and sages have followed asceticism as a principle which has developed into several schools of thought and significantly influenced the Indian way of life. The last stage of the four 'asramas' or stages of a man's life in ancient Indian texts advocate the life of an ascetic. Manu, the ancient Indian law-giver describing the different stages says:

*And when he (the man) has spent the third part of his lifespan in the forests in this way, he may abandon all attachments and wander as an ascetic for the fourth part of his lifespan (1991; pg. 120)*

The ascetic's life was totally cut off from earthly considerations and his only task was to wander about for his minimum daily needs in search of the ultimate freedom and "when he has gradually abandoned all attachments in this way and is freed from all the pairs (dualisms of sensory perceptions, such as pain and pleasure, heat and cold, hunger and satiety, honour and dishonour), he is absorbed right into the ultimate reality" (ibid; pg. 125). Even outside the ambit of the laws of Manu, asceticism has been a rigorous and often painful way of life devoid of earthly possessions and material comforts in which ascetics wander about in search of a mystic union with a higher reality. In this sense asceticism can be considered a philosophy of the highest kind both in the religious or secular context. In India, ascetics are often confused with monks and both terms are in certain



**Panthapriyo Dhar**

Associate Professor,  
Dept. of English,  
G.C. College,  
Silchar, Assam, India

cases used synonymously. Whereas monks belong to a particular order of a religious group, ascetics may be secular or religious so far their pursuit of the ultimate truth is concerned and which is largely spiritual in nature. The hordes of 'sadhus' who descend during the Kumbh Melas held every six and twelve years in four cities of India are ascetics who have no possessions to call their own, their only aim is to attain that highest state above and beyond the physical world.

Nationalism evolves out of a deep sense of love and belonging to a nation and its different contours in recent times are fiercely being debated. Without delving into the contemporary debates on nation and nationalism, it would suffice to say that nationalism is a shared concept and may vary from society to society, from nation to nation. Therefore, there is a certain degree of exclusivity and even uniqueness associated with the term. The colonial notion of the nation that has come to dominate the discourse in the field in recent times has been variously challenged by native thinkers of erstwhile colonized countries. The whole concept of nationalism therefore hinges on the parameters that one takes to arrive at a point on a particular discourse involving the term. Since the scope of the present paper is limited to the portrayal of nationalistic sentiments that prevailed in Bengal in the 18th century, it would be preposterous to dwell at length on theories of nationalism that have developed in the post-colonial period. In fact, in the Indian context, it is believed that the concept of the Indian nation evolved only during the latter stages of British rule. Nationalism in India in the 18th century may therefore be construed to be region specific, but the united concept of India or Bharat was still dominant. Nationalism is consistent with the ideas of modernization and industrialization and scholars and political scientists have agreed that nationalism is contingent primarily on these two ideas. Quoting Ernest Gellner, Partha Chatterjee says: *The perception of uneven development (created by industrialization which disrupts traditional society unevenly) creates the possibility for nationalism; it is born when the more and less advanced populations can be easily distinguished in cultural terms. 'Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist- but it does need some pre-existing differentiating marks to work on ...'* (*Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*; 1999; Pg- 4)

Nationalism thus grows out of something, it has a definite marker by which it is singled out from other 'nationalisms'. In the broader perspective nationalism bases itself on 'differentiating marks', the icons with which its adherents and proponents identify themselves with. In so doing nationalists often espouse radical ideas which may not find favour with the general people at large. In the 18th century, the concept of India as a nation was still a far cry because of the numerous kingdoms and principalities which constituted nationalities in themselves. But the entrenchment of the British colonialists as rulers after the Battle of Plassey in 1757 spurred sporadic revolts in certain pockets of the country against the

colonialists and the urge to liberate the country from foreign rule gradually gained momentum. Such revolts incited other principalities to the nationalistic cause transcending regional boundaries which culminated in the revolt of 1857 designated as the first war of Indian independence. It is against this backdrop of nationalism that the scope of this paper is limited.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) is in many ways a pioneering Indian novelist whose first novel *Rajmohan's Wife* was written in English and serialized in 1864 and who thereafter wrote fourteen novels in Bengali which included romances, historical novels, political novels and even one with an autobiographical plot. Chatterjee was one of the first graduates of the University of Calcutta and served as a deputy magistrate under the British Government. His novels not only depict the contemporary socio-political scene of Bengal but are also powerful commentaries of the author's views of life and society. Clinton B. Seely remarks that in the context of 19th century Bengal, "Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, later could with impunity make his own version of the European novel into a domesticated, Bangla literary form" (2008, pg. 117), implying that Chatterjee renovated the western literary art to suit his own purpose. *Anandamath* published in 1882 is one of his remarkable novels set in 18th century Bengal and the theme is a patriotic uprising by a group of ascetics (sannyasis) against the British rule occasioned by the great famine of Bengal of 1770. The taxation system of the colonial government was deemed oppressive specially during the time of the famine and the sannyasi revolt was largely a consequence of a repressive measure, a fact borne out of historical records. In this sense, *Anandamath* is a historical novel and nationalism is the prime focus here, a brand of nationalism treated with intense fervour for the first time, lending to the Indian novel a novelty of its own. By using ascetics as agents of revolt against colonial oppression and weaving their activities with the greater cause of the Indian nation, Chatterjee has treaded a new path. K.R.S. Iyengar's remark in this context is relevant: *Anandamath (1882) is Bankim's best-known, though not his greatest novel. In this and other novels, Bankim introduced sannyasis (wandering ascetics) into the fictional narratives;* (1996; pg. 316)

The sannyasis who owe their tradition to the ancient Indian philosophy of Adwaita School, in course of time broadly distinguished themselves into two groups - the wandering ascetics and the resident ascetics. But a common thread that binds the two groups is that they moved from one place to another for spiritual fulfillment or pilgrimage. Therefore, mobility has been an ingrained tradition of the sannyasi culture. Bankimchandra Chatterjee imparts a sort of militant nationalism on the sannyasis in *Anandamath* and it is a matter of some debate whether a strict form of asceticism is compatible with nationalism and vice-versa. A casual observation of the two terms reveal a disparity, for asceticism is more a philosophy, a way of life often philosophical, spiritual and even abstract whereas nationalism is an outlook, a broader vision encompassing the myriad

common sentiments associated with a nation by a community of people. As practices, asceticism and nationalism are diverse so far their ends are concerned with seemingly no common traits to bind them. It goes to the credit of Chatterjee for infusing much of the novel *Anandamath* with the fervour of ascetic nationalism under the leadership of one, Mahatma Satya and his band of followers of the sannyasi cult who revolt militantly against the British, incurring heavy losses to the enemy both in terms of men and wealth, in the realization of their goal to free mother India. Made in a different context, Meenakshi Mukherjee's observation is relevant to be quoted here: *...Bankimchandra's novels serve as productive sites for studying the complex, and often contradictory, configurations of the colonial mind, as also for understanding the process in which the emergent notion of national identity was constructed through fictional rewritings of history.* (2009; pg. 128)

It is a historical fact the sannyasi revolt took place in the aftermath of the Bengal famine of 1770 around Murshidabad and Baikunthapur forests of Jalpaiguri, to protest the oppressive taxation of the Britishers. Though there are different versions of the uprising, Bankimchandra Chatterjee fashions the revolt into the structure of *Anandamath* thereby pioneering a new genre of Indian fiction.

*Anandamath*, originally written in Bengali has been translated into English and several other languages. Also titled *Abbey of Bliss* in one of its English translations, this paper is based on the English translation titled as the vernacular one, by Basanta Koomar Roy which 'is a skillful translation of a novel which, though over a century old now, continues to speak to people today'.<sup>1</sup> The locale of the novel is a village, Padachina ravaged by famine displaying a solitary look, dismal and an overwhelming despair in which 'things had come to such a pass that children were even afraid to cry' (2000; pg. 24). The oppressive taxation system of the British Government paid no heed to the natural disaster and people were forced to pay taxes even when there was hardly anything to eat. The only house in the village that stood apart was that of the relatively affluent Mahendra Singh and his wife Kalyani, and the couple had a little daughter. Even they wanted to migrate for there was nothing left in the village. With no means of transportation available, the family set out on foot to Calcutta. On the way Kalyani and her daughter are abducted by a band of robbers and Mahendra is separated as he had gone out to look for food. Kalyani escapes with her daughter from her abductors only to faint at the feet of Mahatma Satya who takes her at the hideout where an old structure stood bordered by broken walls. As she regained consciousness, the Mahatma told her : *... this is the temple, the mosque, the vihara and the gurdwara of Mother India. Cast aside all fear from your heart,* (ibid; pg. 30) Mahatma Satya was the leader of a group of sannyasis whose avowed goal was to free mother India from the British yoke. They had set up base in the impregnable forests with a hill on one side and a highway at the bottom. The task of the sannyasis was now to find out Mahendra so that

he could be reunited with his daughter and wife. Mahendra was captured by the British and made captive. Bhavan and Jivan alongwith other sannyasis not only freed Mahendra but killed the British officer and some of his sepoy and looted the tax cart. Mahendra slowly began to realize the noble spirit of nationalism as Bhavan sang on their way back:

*Mother hail !*

*Thou with sweet springs flowing,*

*Thou fair fruits bestowing,*

*Cool with zephyrs blowing,*

*Green with corn-crops growing,*

*Mother hail!*

*Thou of the shivering-joyous moon-blanch night,*

*Thou with fair groups of flowering tree-clumps bright,*

*Sweetly smiling*

*Speech beguiling Pouring bliss and bless,*

*Mother, hail!*

*Though now three hundred million voices through thy mouth sonorous shout,*

*Though twice three hundred million hands*

*hold thy trenchant sword blades out,*

*Yet with all this powers now,*

*Mother, wherefore powerless thou?*

*Holder thou of myriad might,*

*I salute thee, saviour bright,*

*Thou who dost all foes afright,*

*Mother, hail!*

*Thou soul creed and wisdom art,*

*Thou our very mind and heart,*

*And the life-breath in our bodies.*

*Thou as strength in arms of men,*

*Thou as faith in hearts dost reign.*

*Himalaya - crested one, rivalless,*

*Radiant in thy spotlessness,*

*Thou whose fruits and waters bless,*

*Mother, hail!*

*Hail, thou verdant, unbeguiling,*

*Hail, O decked one, sweetly smiling,*

*Ever bearing,*

*Ever rearing,*

*Mother, hail!* (ibid; pg. 38-39)

The song is an anonymous translation of *Bande Mataram*, a song eulogizing the nation as a mother and extolling her myriad virtues and which served as a rallying cry for the sannyasis and resounds throughout the novel as a common refrain. The full implications of the song is clearly brought out in the conversation of Mahendra and Bhavan, when the former asks, 'who is this mother', Bhavan replies : *The Motherland is our only mother. Our Motherland is higher than heaven. Mother India is our mother. We have no other mother. We have no father, no brother, no sister, no wife, no children, no home, no hearth - all we have is the Mother...* (ibid; pg. 38)

True to the sannyasi cult, Bhavan voices the manifesto of his group. It is interesting that the mother trope is a significant addition to the nationalist sentiment where the country is visualized as a female entity worthy to be worshipped, lending a spiritual touch to nationalism. It is no coincidence that most countries are referred to by their citizens as

'motherland', the mother-figure emanating from ancient mythology in which the earth is conceived of as a feminine entity. The Greek goddess of agricultural aspects referred to as the grain goddess is Demeter and her counterpart, Ceres in Roman mythology are embodiments of the essential feminine closely identified with the earth. The naming of the continent of Europe from Europa, a woman of Phoenician origin also testifies to the cult of acknowledging the feminine figure in terms of geographical references. In *Anandamath*, the overwhelming image is that of Mother India towering above all the incidents of the novel. The three images of mother India demonstrated to Mahendra by Mahatma Satya - 'a gigantic, imposing, resplendent, yes almost a living map of India'; 'a map of India in rags and tears'; and, 'the effulgence of the light was radiating from the map of a golden India' (ibid, pg. 43) - signified the image of India before the colonial rule, during the colonial rule and as India is visualized to be once she is free from the colonial yoke, respectively. These images keep the ascetics focused on their avowed aim of liberating the motherland visualized as a goddess. David Kinsley in his book *Hindu Goddesses* (1987) remarks that: *The fundamental conviction that the earth itself or the Indian subcontinent itself is a goddess, indeed, that she is one's mother pervades the modern cult of Bharat Mata (Mother India), in which all Indians are called sons or children of India and are expected to protect their mother without regard for personal hardship and sacrifice ... (ibid; pg. 181)*

Kinsley traces the concept from the ancient Gupta dynasty (4th century A.D.) establishing the fact that identification of the earth as mother goddess in the Indian subcontinent dates back to antiquity. Jawaharlal Nehru also refers to this concept in his *The Discovery of India* (1946): *The mountains and the rivers of India, and the fresh and the broad fields, which gave us food were all dear to us, but what counted ultimately were the people of India, people like them and me, who were spread out all over this vast land. Bharat Mata, Mother India, was essentially these millions of people, and victory to her meant victory to these people. (Quoted in The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus, 1999; pg. 146)*

Intertwined with intense nationalism and anti-colonial activities are love, lust, romance, conjugal life, frustration, despair, renunciation, all woven together in the texture of *Anandamath*. Indeed, it would be too simplistic to ascribe a totally nationalistic perspective to the novel for the novelist takes care to portray the socio-cultural aspects of contemporary Bengal with equal ease. The reunion of Mahendra with his wife Kalyani and daughter Sukumari in the abode of the sannyasi shifts the focus to family life. However, Mahendra is willing to forsake family life for the greater cause of the nation. Other prominent characters, Bhavan, Jiban, Dhiren and Nabin have left behind comfortable family lives to join the order of the ascetics and stay in the 'ashram' secluded from the common run of life, donning saffron robes and observing the strictest of austerities. After the famine, the socio-economic life became normal but the

oppressive taxation imposed by the British became more severe. The sannyasis, not only recruited new converts but looted the British armoury and treasury sporadically to bolster their fight against the enemy. Mahendra's house in Padachina was converted to an arms factory which supplied arsenal to the sannyasis. Rebellion against the British entered the violent phase when Warren Hastings, the then Governor General sent Major Edwards to take on the 'children' that is the order of the sannyasis who had freed Northern Bengal from the British yoke. Towards the end of the novel, as the British launched a coordinated assault, heavy losses were inflicted on the 'children'. However, Mahatma Satya and Mahendra rallying the remaining sannyasis egged on and inspired by the cries of 'Bande Mataram' gathered their last resources and ultimately decimated the enemy: *Before long there was not a man left of the English army to convey to Warren Hastings the news of this historic defeat. (2000; pg. 132)*

The novel, *Anandamath* showcases the heroic exploits of a band of sannyasis whose revolutionary zeal and fervour results in total annihilation of the British, paving the way for liberation. Though confined to a small geographical locale, that is the north of Bengal, historically speaking, the Sannyasi Revolt laid the foundation of violent rebellion in the rest of the country. Viewed in the historical context, *Anandamath* is path breaking novel and as Mulk Raj Anand puts it, 'an extraordinary political novel'<sup>2</sup>

Asceticism and nationalism are mutually exclusive terms per se, but Bankimchandra Chatterjee has fused very effectively both the ideals to present a novel which not only has historical authenticity but also inaugurates a new genre of Indian fiction. It goes to the credit of Chatterjee to fashion a novel out of a quintessential theme relevant to 18th century Bengal with a far deeper spiritual root entrenched firmly in the fourth stage of a man's life—sannyasa—according to ancient Indian texts. This delving into the authentic Indian past finds relevance in Gauri Vishwanathan's comment that: *Nationalist writers like the Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chatterjee, who were schooled in the best Western literary establishments in Bengal turned their attention to reviving myths and tales of the past to stir up longings in the people for the return of a golden age. (Masks of Conquest, 1990, pg. 157)*

It is not only in *Anandamath* that the themes of asceticism, renunciation and nationalism are wedded together, but Chatterjee's other works like *Devi Chaudhurani* and *Kapalkundala* also bear striking similarities in this regard. Perhaps the author's long association as an officer under the British colonial government fashioned his outlook as a writer for he realized that until the Indians recovered their past heritage and dug up their myths, it would be difficult to shrug off the foreign domination. His writings bear testimony to this contention. Partha Chatterjee contends that 'Bankim's explanation of the subjection of India is not in terms of material or physical strength. It is an explanation in terms of culture' (1999, pg. 55) implying that cultural resistance stands at the heart of nationalism. It is in this

relentless pursuit of cultural tropes that Bankimchandra Chatterjee infuses into his historical novels such as nationalistic sentiments that makes them stand apart in all fiction. The author's concern for Indian culture and the need to strengthen it against the onslaught of imperialist forces finds echo in Partha Chatterjee's statement that: *In talking about the subjection of India, Bankim encapsulates into his conception of the cultural failure of the Indian people to face up to the realities of power a whole series of conquests dating from the first Muslim invasions of India and culminating in the establishment of British rule*, (ibid; pg. 55-56)

*Anandamath* stands at the forefront of nationalist fiction in India by virtue of its stress on cultural artifacts and the infusion of nationalistic fervour in a group of ascetics who rise in revolt against British rule. Its resonance has been far reaching, perhaps even beyond what the author had himself visualized. The prophetic relevance, the historical background and the cultural dimensions - all combine to accord to the novel an immortal place in the annals of Indian literature.

#### **Aim of the study**

The aim of the paper is to depict the nationalist uprising in India long before the country could be considered a nation as we understand the term today. The novel 'Anandamath' by Bankimchandra Chatterjee introduces ascetics as the agents of collective revolt against the British rule which may be said to be the first uprising of its kind in India. The paper aims to highlight how ascetics took

the lead in showing the way to armed rebellion and put down the colonial hegemony.

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