

## Representation of Anticolonial Rebellion and Fervent Nationalism in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath*

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**Abstract:** *The colonial history of India is full of narratives of several anti-colonial struggles across the country. A few rebellions have been always in the limelight, while a few strong rebellions at the local levels remained unnoticed or rather side-lined from the historical metanarrative. An unusual, offbeat revolution took place in Bengal in the late eighteenth century, which was led by fakirs and Sannyasis. They plundered and looted the wealth of the East India Company who were collecting it as a tax from Indians. It was one of the earliest rebellions of the locals against the British empire. With the song 'Bande Mataram' as a war-cry and central motif, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee glorified the Sannyasi rebellion in his novel Anandamath which could be considered as an outstanding masterpiece of patriotic literature written in the 19th century. The story of the novel is set in the severe Bengal famine of the 1770s when several people died and several families got devastated, except a few landlords who sustained the famine. With the patriotic ideals such as 'worship of Mother India', a strong-armed revolution by the 'ascetic Children of Mother India', 'Temple of Mother India in a dense forest', this novel is an unfailing story of patriotism and vibrant nationalism as well as a re-narration of the untold stories of freedom struggle.*

**Key Words:** Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Bande Mataram*, Mother India, Ascetics, the Children, Nationalism, Patriotism, Revolution

### Introduction

Literature of the Indian freedom struggle has been a distinctive genre in Indian English literature. There have been several poets and novelists who glorified various freedom fighters across India through their works. Although the freedom struggle reached its peak during the first half of the twentieth century, the anti-colonial struggles and movements in eighteenth as well as nineteenth-century India cannot be ignored. There were several local fights and tussles led by laymen to fight the British Empire. All these previous battles are extraordinary tales of heroism exhibited by ordinary people who loved their nation beyond limits. Some stories have been narrated time and again in the history textbooks while some have remained in shadows.

In the genre of the literature of Indian freedom struggle, we usually come across the names of novelists such as R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and Manohar Malgaonkar and poets such as Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu who invoked the feelings of nationalism in their works. In the post-independence period, there have been writers such as Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor who, through their literary masterpieces such as *Midnight's Children* and *The Great Indian Novel* held a postmodernist perspective on India's freedom struggle. The famous playwright Asif Currimbhoy utilized the theme of Indians' fight with the oppressive colonizers in several of his dramas. Although there is a plethora of literature on India's freedom struggle during the late nineteenth and the early

twentieth century, there have been several ‘visions’ of India’s freedom from the tyrannical British rule in the literature that was produced much before the First War of Indian Independence in 1857.

Kylash Chunder Dutt’s *A Journal of 48 Hours of the Year 1945* was published in *The Calcutta Literary Gazette* much earlier, in 1835. Through this fantasy fiction, Kylash Chunder Dutt displayed the deepest desire of Indians to break free from the oppressive chains of the British Empire.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was another prominent writer of the period of the ‘Winds of Change’. “Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay is considered the pioneer of the revival of Bengali literature in the 19th century. He influenced thousands of writers including stalwarts like Rabindranath Tagore, Surendranath Dutt, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and more.” [2] He was one of the most patriotic writers of his times, as he abandoned the use of the English language and chose to write in Bengali which was his mother tongue. With this decision, he reminds us of the Kenyan Postcolonial writer Ngugi wa Thiong’O who abandoned his Christian name and the colonizer’s (English) language and started writing in Gikuyu. Popularly known as the writer of the first English novel *Rajmohan’s Wife* (1864) in India, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee also produced other famous works such as *Devi Choudhurani*, *Bishabriksha*, *Durgeshnandini*, *Bande Mataram*, etc. His literature reflects the spirit of nationalism and vision for India’s independence. *Anandamath* (1872) is an effort of Chatterjee to reflect fervent patriotism that led to some of the fiercest and vibrant freedom struggles in Bengal. It is a political novel set in the times of the famine that caused severe distress in Bengal in the 1770s. When the whole region was under the threat of evacuation and a shadow of death, there was a strong anti-colonial movement that was building up inside the deep forests of Bengal. This is famously known as the Sannyasi revolution of Bengal. Chatterjee throws light upon this historical chapter which is today marginalized from the mainstream History books. The present paper aims to analyze the novel *Anandamath* as an anti-colonial and nationalist narrative.

Although there have been debates on the manipulation of the historical facts by Chatterjee in his novel, several strong-armed rebellions led by Sanyasis and fakirs indeed took place in certain parts of Bengal between the 1770s and 1800. Amrita Sengupta, in her research article, mentions its historical details as:

Sannyasi-fakir rebellion commenced in the mid 1760s. It took the Company state almost four decades to quell the ‘disturbances’ they caused and the ‘violence’ they perpetuated on the countryside of Bengal. The most affected areas were Purnea, Malda, Dhaka, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Cooch Behar and Murshidabad. Sannyasi and fakir rebellion remain immortalised in our imagination because of the leadership provided by leaders such as Majnu Shah and Chirag Ali and the legends such as Devi Chaudhurani and Bhawani Pathak that it created. [3]

### **Spirituality, Asceticism and Nationalism:**

It is interesting to remark here that Bankim Chandra Chatterjee makes a perfect blend of Indian Spirituality, Asceticism and Nationalism in one story. He weaves the combination perfectly. The realm of spirituality usually involves the silent seeking of the self and peace within oneself. Traditionally, spiritual masters have nothing to do with arms, weapons, the army, and conquering the enemy. But in this story of the Sannyasi rebellion, the author wants to reiterate the idea that spirituality, asceticism, and austerity could be used as ways of self-defense against the enemy.

Although the traditional discourses have taught us that the spiritual seekers are usually silent and peace-loving individuals, there have been a few saints in the history of medieval and modern India who advocated physical toughness, perfection in the skills of warfare, martial arts and exercise for defending oneself against the enemy. Shri Samarth Ramdas, a spiritual master and saint-poet of Maharashtra who was a contemporary of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj was a strong believer in the idea that a man should have a strong mind and a strong body as well. Saint Ekanath, another Maharashtrian saint was also a great swordsman for his self-protection. There have been instances where time and again muscle strength was given priority over spiritual and mental strength.

In modern times, it is a well-known belief that a Sannyasi is an individual who has nothing to do with materialism and familial ties. Sannyasi leads life on the path of spirituality in the quest for peace and inner self. That a Sannyasi does not bother about the external realities of the world and people is a common belief. But in *Anandamath*, the concept of Sannyasi is subverted. In this novel, Sannyasis represent everything that has to do with war, bloodshed and revolution but for the survival and victory of the countrymen against the tyrant British rulers. The ascetics in this story execute a revolution for the cause of their 'Mother India' with a strong spirit of nationalism. In one of the conversations between Bhavan and Mahendra, the strong nationalism is poured out through the dialogue of Bhavan, the young ascetic soldier, thus:

'We recognise no other mother', Bhavan said with feeling. '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'. (Chatterji, 49)

The meaning of Sannyasas as in the four-fold Ashram system of ancient Indian tradition is not represented in the text. Sannyasa which is the fourth stage of life, is not shown in this sense here. The Sannyasis in this novel, led by Mahatma Satya are not the Sannyasis in this sense. They are not initiated into Sannyasa for the whole lifetime, unlike several Sannyasis in the Hindu tradition. A Sannyasi should abstain from his family and home. He has to live on alms and be detached from all ties. But the Sannyasis who usher out a rebellion against the British Government are ascetics for the time being. They are 'Part-time' Sannyasis who have taken a vow of strict continence and absolute celibacy only till they achieve their mission of eradicating the British empire from their part of the country.

Mahatma Satya, who is the chief of all the 'Children' (Mother India's children who are fighting to free her from the clutches of the British) believes in the principles of the fourth Ashrama of life according to Hindu life, i.e., Sannyasa Ashrama. He strongly believes that pure observance of celibacy and continence is required for waging a powerful rebellion against the British soldiers. He commands his disciples that they should not even think of their wife or children when they are on their mission of fighting for their 'Mother'. Even a small distraction in the minds of these Children would lead to disaster. As a fervent devotee of Mother India Mahatma Satya, a Sannyasi, bothers about the severe conditions in which Indians were struggling to live under the tyranny of the British rulers. He thus realises the need for an action to save Indians through a revolution. He motivates Mahendra Singh for a rebellion thus:

'... Can you find another country on earth outside India where human beings are forced by starvation to live on grass? Here in India famine-stricken people today are eating creeper, ant-hills, jackals, dogs and even human flesh! And the British are shipping our wealth to their treasuries in Calcutta; and from there that wealth is to be

shipped again to England. There is no hope for India until we drive the British out. Only then will the Motherland live again.' (Chatterji, 52)

Among his disciples, Mahendra Singh is the one who strictly observes the discipline of the cult and remains away from his wife and child for a long time. But he remains under the impression that they are already dead, as he has seen his wife Kalyani committing suicide before he joins the order of the Children. But there are other disciples such as Bhavan and Jiban who are the strongest and smartest warriors of the group. We see that in the course of the battle against the British soldiers, both Bhavan and Jiban forego their vows, at least to some extent. Bhavan gets infatuated by the beauty of Kalyani whose life he has revived and atones for this infatuation by sacrificing his life in the battle. On the other hand, Jiban gets almost on the verge of breaking his vow of being away from a woman when his wife Shanti joins the Children, disguised as a young man named Nabin. But due to the strong asceticism exhibited by Shanti herself, Jiban restrains himself from being close to Shanti lest his vow is broken.

Whether it is for Jiban or Bhavan or any of the pupils of Mahatma Satya, the rules are stringent. If a man, during his commitment to the cause of his motherland lives with any woman, the atonement for that would be death. Thus, following strict asceticism is mandatory for the Children. Mahatma Satya believes in the thought that if a man dedicates himself to Mother India, he should give all himself, all his energy to the cause of freeing his motherland. To instill fervent patriotism among the pupils, Mahatma Satya has constructed a temple dedicated to 'Mother India' deep inside the forest. Any person visiting this temple would be attracted and drawn instantly to the cause of serving one's motherland. Such is the magnetism that Mahatma Satya has given to the temple of Mother India, a personification of our motherland. Chatterjee tries to show how these rebels considered asceticism as a way to achieve national freedom. It is a fact that a warrior has to be detached from the thoughts of his family, lest he would become weak on the battlefield and yield to the enemies. Therefore, strict asceticism is absolutely important for these fighters.

#### **Patriotism that Breaks Gender Stereotypes:**

It is absolutely interesting to note that, in this novel, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee has presented a few female characters that are more heroic in their deeds than their male counterparts. The author has challenged the generalized statement that women are weak, they cannot bear the sight of bloodshed and hence, cannot go to the battlefield and fight in the war. Chatterjee has portrayed heroic women in the times when India was still under the shadow of orthodoxy where women's lives were limited in the four walls of the house. In contrast to the general assumption, Chatterjee has glorified women's heroism through the characters such as Shanti and Kalyani. Both these women show exceptional heroic deeds. On the one hand is Kalyani, wife of the prosperous landlord Mahendra Singh attempts suicide to kill herself so that her husband would join the freedom struggle without any worry; and on the other hand, is Shanti, who is wise, witty, smart, beautiful, graceful, sharp and heroic in her skills at war.

At the beginning of the story, Kalyani is shown as a soft woman who cannot endure the difficulties of life. She is a woman dependent on her husband for protection and security when the couple decides to move out of their town Padachina due to the severity of the famine that is troubling the whole region. But eventually, Kalyani becomes a woman of courage and valour. When she is revived to life by Bhavan, she is given shelter by an old lady in a town near the 'forest of the Children'. Although Bhavan gets infatuated by Kalyani and proposes to her to marry him, temporarily forgetting his vow, Kalyani remains a chaste wife to Mahendra Singh. She is like Sita in the *Ramayana* who waits for her husband to come to her after the great battle. Kalyani, as a sensible wife of Mahendra Singh, does not become a

distraction in his path. She lets him follow his passionate desire to serve Mother India and understands his eager desire to join the clan of the Children. She waits for his return and only on his return does she reunite with Mahendra Singh. This sacrifice and patience of Kalyani have been glorified by Chatterji. Thus, Kalyani becomes a strength with which Mahendra is able to build a castle, manufacture arms and ammunitions and thus battle against the British. It is not just Mahendra Singh's intense desire, but also Kalyani's sacrifice which becomes a major factor in making Mahendra Singh a hero in the battle of the Children against the British soldiers.

In the episode where Bhavan is infatuated with Kalyani's beauty, Kalyani is shown to be a woman of complete control over her senses. Even though she does not know the whereabouts of her husband Mahendra Singh, she does not accept Bhavan's proposal. She remains a chaste wife and devotes herself to learning the scriptures from Mahatma Satya. In the absence of her husband, Kalyani takes charge of her own life and moves onto the path of wisdom under the training of Mahatma Satya. Kalyani thus represents the ideal womanhood and a strong individualism that are considered with high respect in the Indian tradition.

There is another impressive woman in this story. It is Jiban's courageous wife Shanti. Shanti represents the woman of the modern age who knows how to smartly tackle various situations. She is shown to be a dutiful wife, who goes with her husband on the battlefield to shoulder her responsibility as a warrior's wife. When Jiban encounters her during his days of Sannyasa, he gets infatuated by her beauty temporarily and feels like abandoning his duties as a soldier. But Shanti reminds him of his duties thus, 'Shame on you! You are a hero! The greatest happiness in my life is that I am the wife of a hero. And you want to renounce the path of heroism just for the sake of a wife? Do not love me so. I am willing to deprive myself even of that happiness, but never forsake your path of duty.' (Chatterji, 80)

Although Shanti is aware of the fact that with her feminine grace she can tempt any man, she uses these tactics only during the war wherein she has to trap the enemy with her tricks. She understands the mission of her life and even that of her husband Jiban who is a strong commander in the army formed by Mahatma Satya. With a strong passion for Mother India, she too decides to join the battle along with her husband. Shanti has mastered all the techniques of war and is an excellent fighter. Mahatma Satya is also impressed with her skills and devotion to the cause of India's freedom struggle and addresses her as 'Mother'. Despite being close to her husband Jiban who lives in the same military troop as her, she does not tempt him sexually. Thus, she stands out as one of the most impressive characters in the novel by killing her physical desires at a young age, despite being close to her husband and despite being a beautiful female.

In both these heroic women, we see a strong passion for national service and patriotism. Chatterjee tries to break the gender stereotypes of the age which believed that women's lives are confined to household work and that women cannot possess or learn warrior skills.

### **Militancy as a Mode of Anti-colonial Struggle:**

Freedom fighters have used various ways to dethrone the colonizer. Some were pacifists, and moderates who believed in changing the situation through silent but persistent persuasion, while some were extremists, rebellious and revolutionary who believed that militancy is the only way to fight and destroy the enemy. In Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's fervent nationalism, revolutionary militancy is regarded high and it is clear by the way he gives powerful descriptions of the patriotic freedom fighters. Basanta Koomar Roy, in his 'Translator's Introduction' to the novel writes, "Mahatma Gandhi preached a gospel of

pacifism. Chatterji, on the other hand, set forth the principle of unselfish militancy as taught by Krishna in the *Bhagavat Geeta*, the Bible of the Hindus.” (Chatterji, 18)

The song ‘*Bande Mataram*’ which is the chief motif in the novel, instills vibrant feelings among all the Children. It becomes their war cry. When they attack the British soldiers, they utter ‘*Bande Mataram*’ loudly every time they kill an enemy and this fills great confidence of victory within them.

Mahatma Satya, though an ascetic, is a master in war skills. He systematically plans every move so that the British army does not get a chance to attack the Children. He is a warrior in disguise of Sannyasi. Being a perfect leader, he is apt at managing his army. Jiban, Bhavan, Dhiren are his chief generals and he knows their abilities in the war. He knows how to persuade youngsters for the cause of India’s freedom. The initiation of Mahendra Singh, a prosperous landlord of Padachina is an example of this. Mahatma Satya believes in utilizing the property, skills, and resources of the people to get freedom from the British. The Children use militancy only against the oppressive Britishers, they even loot the wealth accumulated by the British agents by force, as they want to deprive them of a chance to grow rich out of the revenue, tax and wealth collected from the native Indians.

The Children’s military power and skills are displayed throughout the novel. They are not just physically strong but also use their sharp intelligence in the war. They adopt strategies such as guerrilla warfare and ‘honey trap’ to beat the enemy and achieve their mission. Shanti herself chooses to go to the camp of the British General in the guise of a beggar singer, to gather secret information from the enemy about their further war moves.

Although the story is set in the times when modern technology was yet to develop, Chatterjee astonishes us by describing the intelligence, skills and techniques that are used by the indigenous fighters against the modernized Europeans (British soldiers). He underlines here that no matter how you fight; if you have a passion and strong determination, anything could be possible. With a strong patriotism, the Children destroy several tanks and canons of the British generals in the war which becomes a major part of the novel.

### **Sacrifice as an Ideal Value:**

In any culture in general and in Indian culture in particular, ‘dying for a cause’ has always been a matter of pride and respect. Several titles are attributed to war martyrs in our nation. Since ancient times, a soldier dying on the battlefield is considered to attain heaven after death, as he dies for a noble cause for the sake of his people. The concept of ‘*Veera Maranam*’ has been glorified even in our ancient epics such as the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat*.

In *Anandamath*, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee glorifies the sacrifice of life for the sake of one’s nation and freedom. The Children under the training of Mahatma Satya are ever-ready to give away their lives on the battlefield. Heroes such as Jiban, Bhavan and Dhiren consider it holy and pious to die as a warrior in the war. Expression of the desire for martyrdom is frequently seen in this novel. Bhavan, towards the end of the war with the British soldiers, says in the battlefield thus:

‘I shall not return, ever,’ Bhavan retorted, ‘as long as one of these Englishmen remains alive. Jiban, I beg you, retire from here and watch from a distance how I alone shall slaughter these English enemies of our beloved Mother India; for I must die today – and I will die today – yes, die to ---’ (Chatterji, 145)

This fever for ‘martyrdom’ strikes even the female character such as Shanti. She deems it her duty to sacrifice herself, her pleasures, her marriage with Jiban. Shanti is even ready to fight and die in the war against the British.

Sacrificing one’s life with ‘*Bande Mataram*’ on their lips is considered supreme among the Children. Thousands of the Children die on the battlefield while fighting for their Mother India. Sacrifice thus becomes a great virtue of valour and devotion in the novel. Sacrificing their lives in the war against the enemy these children of Mother India feel a sense of fulfilment of their life’s most important duty.

### Conclusion:

Having witnessed the oppressive and torturous rule of the British Empire, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was extremely powerful in expressing his vision for a free India. With Sannyasis as the heroes of the novel who are proactive in the freedom struggle, *Anandamath* becomes a phenomenal novel of the nineteenth century to echo the ethos of nationalism and patriotism. Chatterjee has clearly shown how the thought of considering India as ‘Mother’ revived the spirit of nationalism among the Sannyasis. The novel showcases an important part of Indian history that has been side-lined and not included in the metanarrative of the Indian Freedom Struggle.

Thus, I have tried to analyze the novel from certain important perspectives which seem extraordinary in the twenty-first century when we speak about battles for freedom. Bringing into focus, a novel that has been an impressive work of art in terms of its beauty and effects is the purpose of this paper.

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