



Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and the Ideological Foundations of Indian Nationalism: A Discourse of *Bande Mataram*

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Abstract:

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894) occupies a foundational position in the intellectual genealogy of modern Indian nationalism. Among his most enduring interventions, Bande Mataram—originally composed within the novel Anandamath (1882)—emerged as both a literary artefact and a political idiom that shaped nationalist imagination, mobilization, and symbolic politics. This paper examines how Bande Mataram contributed to the ideological foundations of Indian nationalism by producing a culturally resonant language of nationhood rooted in affect, devotion, sacrifice, and moral community. Drawing on textual analysis and historical contextualization, the study argues that Bankim’s nationalist discourse fused cultural revivalism with a proto-political nationalism that framed the nation as a sacred motherland, enabling the translation of civilizational identity into political consciousness. The paper situates Bankim within nineteenth-century Bengal’s reformist and revivalist milieu, exploring how colonial modernity, print culture, and Hindu cultural symbolism interacted in constructing nationalist rhetoric. It further traces the transformation of Bande Mataram from a literary hymn into a mass slogan during the Swadeshi movement (1905–1908), demonstrating its capacity to unify resistance while also generating contestations around religious imagery and inclusivity. The paper concludes that Bande Mataram was not merely a song but a conceptual tool that produced a moral-aesthetic framework for nationalism, shaping both political communication and national identity formation, while revealing tensions intrinsic to cultural nationalism in a plural society.

Keywords: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay; Bande Mataram; Indian Nationalism; Anandamath; Cultural Nationalism; Swadeshi Movement; Colonial Bengal.

Introduction:

Indian nationalism did not emerge solely as a political program against colonial rule; it also evolved as an ideological and cultural discourse that sought to reimagine community, sovereignty, and identity. In this process, literature became a vital site for producing nationalist consciousness, particularly in nineteenth-century Bengal where the colonial encounter generated both intellectual modernity and cultural anxiety. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay stands at this intersection: a novelist, essayist, and cultural theorist who offered one of the earliest coherent vocabularies for imagining the Indian nation. The significance of Bankim’s contribution lies not simply in his articulation of anti-colonial sentiment but in his *ideological*

construction of nationhood. His composition *Bande Mataram* (literally “I praise thee, Mother”) within the novel *Anandamath* provided a symbolic grammar through which political nationalism could be imagined as sacred duty. The paper takes *Bande Mataram* as a focal text to examine the ideological foundations of Indian nationalism as shaped by cultural symbolism, ethical imagination, and mobilizational power.

Objectives and Scope:

This study has three primary objectives:

1. To analyze how Bankim’s *Bande Mataram* constructs the nation as a sacred moral entity and generates emotional-political identification.
2. To contextualize Bankim’s nationalist discourse within nineteenth-century Bengal’s colonial modernity, religious revivalism, and print culture.
3. To examine the political afterlife of *Bande Mataram* in the Swadeshi movement, including its unifying role and its contested implications in plural politics.

Contribution to Literature:

While Bankim has been extensively studied as a literary figure, this paper contributes by combining political theory and discourse analysis to interpret *Bande Mataram* as an ideological instrument that shaped nationalist consciousness, rather than merely an anthem of protest.

Methodology:

The paper employs a qualitative research design, drawing on:

1. **Textual and discourse analysis** of *Bande Mataram* and relevant passages from *Anandamath*, focusing on themes of nation, devotion, sacrifice, and moral order.
2. **Historical contextualization** using secondary scholarship on colonial Bengal, the emergence of cultural nationalism, and the Swadeshi movement.
3. **Interpretive political analysis**, engaging theories of nationalism concerning symbols, imagined communities, and cultural mobilization.

The study remains evidence-based and avoids speculative claims by relying on published historical research and authoritative secondary sources.

Discussion and Analysis: Bankim Chandra and The Nationalist Discourse of *Bande Mataram*

Bankim Chandra and the Colonial Bengali Public Sphere

Bankim’s nationalism emerged within the intellectual conditions of colonial Bengal: Western education, missionary critique, reformist debates, and the formation of a modern public sphere through vernacular print. The nineteenth century produced an Indian middle class (bhadralok) whose political awareness developed through journals, pamphlets, and literature. Bankim’s writings responded to this milieu, seeking to strengthen cultural self-respect and moral community under colonial domination. From an ideological standpoint, Bankim’s intervention reflected a key nationalist need: the construction of a collective subject capable of political agency. Here, literature was not entertainment but a political instrument that shaped identity. As Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” suggests, the nation is constructed through shared narratives and symbols that allow people to imagine collective belonging beyond immediate social

relations (Anderson, 1983). Bankim's novels and essays contributed to this imagination by offering emotionally charged representations of the motherland and valorizing sacrifice and discipline.

***Anandamath* and the Birth of a Nationalist Sacred:**

Anandamath is set against the background of the late eighteenth-century Sannyasi rebellion, though Bankim's text is better read as a nineteenth-century nationalist allegory. The novel constructs an ascetic brotherhood devoted to the liberation of the motherland, blending spiritual discipline with political struggle. The ideological significance is clear: it portrays national liberation as ethical self-transformation and collective duty rather than merely political confrontation. Within this narrative, *Bande Mataram* functions as a hymnic declaration that sanctifies the land. The nation becomes not an administrative territory but a living moral entity demanding devotion. This is consistent with cultural nationalist models in which the community is imagined through shared civilizational symbols, often drawn from religion, mythology, and collective memory (Chatterjee, 1993). Bankim's thought thus helped shift nationalism from elite constitutional politics toward mass emotional mobilization.

***Bande Mataram* as Ideological Text: Nation as Mother**

The central ideological innovation of *Bande Mataram* is the transformation of the nation into *mother*. This metaphor is not merely poetic—it produces a political ethic. The mother is sacred, nurturing, and worthy of sacrifice; devotion to her is not optional but morally binding. Such symbolism transforms political action into sacred duty.

This metaphor performs multiple functions:

- **Affective mobilization:** Love and reverence create emotional identification stronger than rational persuasion.
- **Moral legitimacy:** Sacrifice becomes virtuous because it serves a sacred object.
- **Collective unity:** Devotional language reduces internal difference by subordinating individuals to a shared sacred identity.

In nationalist theory, symbols act as shortcuts to collective solidarity. They compress historical memory, moral obligation, and shared destiny into communicable forms (Smith, 1991). *Bande Mataram* operates precisely in this manner, providing a condensed nationalist language that could be easily circulated and internalized.

Cultural Nationalism and the Question of Inclusivity:

Bankim's nationalism is often interpreted as **Hindu cultural revivalism**, rooted in Sanskritic imagery and devotional idioms. This cultural framing enabled nationalist consolidation in a context where colonial rule produced cultural inferiority. By reclaiming indigenous symbols, Bankim offered what can be called a "psychology of resistance"—the restoration of self-worth and historical pride. However, the same cultural symbolism also generated tensions. When nationhood is constructed through explicitly religious imagery, it may unintentionally exclude non-adherents. The controversy surrounding *Bande Mataram* in later decades illustrates this complexity: while the song energized anti-colonial mobilization, some groups perceived its religious symbolism as incompatible with plural belonging (Jaffrelot, 1996). The ideological strength of cultural nationalism—its emotional depth—can thus become its political weakness in diverse societies.

Yet it is crucial to note that Bankim's work cannot be reduced to narrow communal ideology. Rather, it reflects the contradictions of early nationalism: the attempt to unify resistance through culturally dominant

symbols in a society still forming political modernity. The tension between cultural rootedness and civic inclusivity would remain a defining problem of Indian nationalism.

From Literary Hymn to Political Slogan: The Swadeshi Afterlife

The political afterlife of *Bande Mataram* peaked during the Swadeshi movement (1905–1908), triggered by the partition of Bengal. Nationalism entered a mass phase where boycotts, protests, and vernacular activism expanded political participation. In this context, *Bande Mataram* moved from novel to street, from literature to political ritual.

The slogan and song served key political functions:

- **Mobilization:** It became a rallying cry in demonstrations.
- **Discipline:** It created a shared nationalist performance through public singing.
- **Legitimacy:** It framed resistance as sacred and morally justified.
- **Identity:** It demarcated nationalist commitment and collective belonging.

Cultural nationalism thus became performative nationalism. The success of *Bande Mataram* lay in its ability to convert abstract anti-colonial sentiment into communicable emotion. In this sense, Bankim's text anticipated the later political strategy of using symbols and songs to create mass solidarity—visible in Gandhian mobilization and beyond.

Ideological Foundations: Sacrifice, Duty, and Moral Community

A critical contribution of *Bande Mataram* to Indian nationalism was its ethical vocabulary. Bankim did not merely call for freedom; he proposed an ideology of national regeneration based on:

- **Sacrifice (tyag):** the nation demands personal surrender.
- **Discipline (sadhana):** political liberation requires moral reform.
- **Collective duty (kartavya):** nationalism becomes an ethical obligation.
- **Civilizational pride:** the nation is ancient, sacred, and morally superior to colonial domination.

Such themes helped build the ideological architecture for nationalism by providing:

1. a moral justification for resistance,
2. a psychological counterweight to colonial superiority,
3. a cultural framework for imagining sovereignty.

Conclusion:

This paper has argued that Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Bande Mataram* constitutes a foundational ideological text in the evolution of Indian nationalism. Far beyond its literary status, *Bande Mataram* created a symbolic and ethical framework through which the nation could be imagined as sacred motherland—an entity capable of commanding devotion, sacrifice, and collective obligation. The analysis demonstrates that Bankim's nationalist discourse emerged from nineteenth-century Bengal's colonial public sphere and cultural revivalism, enabling the translation of civilizational identity into political consciousness.

The study also highlights a central tension: while *Bande Mataram* unified resistance through powerful cultural symbolism, its religious imagery later produced contestations around inclusivity in a plural society. This indicates that early Indian nationalism—particularly in its cultural form—contained both integrative energy and ideological limits.

In contribution to existing scholarship, the paper positions *Bande Mataram* as an instrument of ideological formation, demonstrating how nationalist politics draws strength from affect, symbolism, and moral imagination. Bankim's legacy thus lies in shaping the emotional and cultural foundations of Indian nationalism, revealing how literary discourse can become political power in moments of historical transformation.

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