

Reimagining the Nation: A Critical Study of *Anandamath*

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Abstract

The paper attempts to analyse the reworking of the concept of Nation through Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Anandamath* and explore the idea of Nation as propounded in the novel and its workings within the larger framework of the theory of nation and nationalism. It will further look into the theory of nation if any, as given in the novel and locate it within the historical time of its writing and narrative.

Keywords: *Anandamath*; Identity; Nation; Nationalism; Post-Colonisation.

The *Oxford Advanced Dictionary* defines a nation as “a large body of people united by common descent, history, culture, or language, inhabiting a particular country or territory”. This definition, though simplistic at first glance, becomes hugely problematic when located within any given frame of time. Since a nation is a ‘large body of people’, the fluidity of common-ness among these people ensures that the definition changes its meaning at different points in time and space. While locating the etymological roots of the word-- since it is imperative to understand the concept of nation, one locates it historically as well as linguistically-- nation has its roots in the French word *nacion*, Latin *nation-em* that means breed, stock or race. Similarly, in Spanish one finds words like *nacion* and in Italian *nazione*. However, in ancient Roman society, the Latin word *natio* meant ‘a group of outsiders’ and thus referred to the ‘communities of outsiders’ who lived in Rome and were not given the privilege of Roman citizenship. In the last two hundred years, particularly as an after effect of the French Revolution, nation and nationalism have integrated with various ideologies and isms such as socialism, capitalism, communalism, casteism, ethnicity, linguistic differences, etc. Every time, such confrontations and amalgamations took place, ‘nation’ emerged with a new facet incorporated with the victorious ideology. When looked at as a process

of identification and assertion of 'Self', and manifestations of the self with its cultural heritage, nationalism proved to be a successful tool to unite people and carry out successful struggles and rebellions against the colonial governments or the disintegration of one entity of USSR, perceived until that point as a single homogenous unit into multiple heterogeneous nations. Whereas on one hand, nationalism in this sense provides a blanket of security in preserving and safeguarding cultures and identity, it also runs the risk of being amalgamated into a more globalised and multicultural world. Raymond Williams in his novel *Second Generation* (1964), gives voice to this aspect of nationhood when he writes that Nationalism is like class and the only way to get rid of it is to experience it. Failing to do so runs a chance of it being 'cheated' by other classes or nations.

Ernest Renan, in 1882 attempted to define Nation as a human endeavour that was collectively brought together by the will, consciousness and collective memory of the individuals involved in this task. It refuted the traditional method of defining boundaries by the physiological terrain of a geographical place. However, this definition of Renan --which about two centuries later, is also reflected in Benedict Anderson's definition as well-- failed to account for the existence of heterogeneity in terms of the diverse cultural and collective memories of various inhabitants, who were co-existing. A century later, when Joseph Stalin defines a nation as a "historically constituted, stable community of people, formed based on a common language, territory, economic life and psychological makeup manifested in a common culture" (196), it is again circumscribed within the European models of nations divided on the basis of language or territory lacking the kind of heterogeneity found in other cultures wherein the issue of sharing a language played a less important role. Ernest Gellner provides a more inclusive understanding of nation when he suggests that to understand a nation, it is important to first understand the politics of nationalism, for it is the feeling and shared idea of nationalism that gives birth to a nation.

This idea subverts the very foundation of the problematics of nation and nationalism that developed during the Enlightenment Period in Europe, which believed that first nations are formed and then the common feelings of belonging to the same cohesive, cultural, community-based society that nurture the feelings of nationalism, are birthed.

Benedict Anderson in his seminal work, *Imagined Communities* calls nation an imagined political community wherein the members of the community despite not knowing or even hearing of all the members of the commu-

nity have an idea of their communion. This idea of communion enables people to come together and fight for a common belief, a common cause. The idea of people coming together and consciously sharing a common belief and thought to give birth to a nation is an echo of the idea of a nation propounded by Gellner when he states that it is nationalism that gives birth to a nation. Nationalism in this sense would mean mutual beliefs and aspirations shared by a community of people who partake in the defense and upholding of those shared ideas and beliefs. In the case of India particularly, the shared belief of self-governance made people from different geographical locations, having nothing in common, come together to struggle towards their independence. The idea of a Motherland, a place that is theirs to protect and to revere, inspired them to work towards its independence from the foreign shackles. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandmath* captures the seedling of this thought and acts as an entry point to understand the concept of nation and how this imagined community works towards a common goal. The paper attempts to analyse the reworking of the concept of Nation in the light of the above-problematised definitions, through Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Anandamath*. The paper also tries to explore the idea of the nation as propounded in the novel and its workings within the larger framework of the theory of nation and nationalism. It will further look into the theory of nation if any, as given in the novel and locate it within the historical time of its writing and narrative.

The novel is set in the backdrop of the 1770 Bengal famine and narrates the tale of a Rebellion against the 'evil' ruler Mir Jafar and his British Tax Collectors- in an attempt to establish Hindu Rule over the land of Bengal. Chatterjee was writing at a time when the idea of having greater political control and representation had begun to take form amongst the people.

At a time when the dejection of the loss of 1857 Mutiny was still fresh in the minds of the people and new hope was needed to envision a future free from the foreigner's rule. It was at this point in time that Chatterjee chose to pick a historical event of the Sanyasi Rebellion to recreate and re-present history through *Anandamath*. He borrowed the idea of this historical rebellion to create a work in which the *Sanyasis* come together as *Santan* or the Children of Mother to fight for the 'Hindu way of life'. In his introduction to the translated edition, Julius L Lipner explains the historicity of the event of the Sanyasi Rebellion as portrayed in the novel and writes, "Bankim was not attempting a conventional history. I doubt too if we could call *Anandamath* a 'historical novel'" (43). Mir Jafar who died in 1765 is presented as the Nawab of Bengal during the famine i.e in 1770.

Moreover, contradictory to their portrayal in the novel, the *Sanyasis* who rebelled against the British, were neither Bengali nor moved by the spirit of nationalism but instead were a band of robbers that were looting in times of desperation and poverty. This selective reading of the historical event becomes problematic when worked in the larger framework of the concept of Nation. The Sanyasi Rebellion as presented in the novel does not account for the participation of the Muslim *fakirs* in the revolt against the government. Muslim *fakirs* do not fit into the mould of revived Hindu movement that Chatterjee sought to revive to present a blueprint of the struggle for greater political control from the Government. The very act of re-creation of history is a political one. Chatterjee re-creates a new 'Truth' about a past event in order to fit the narrative into a mould that was popular and acceptable with the Bengali *Bhadralok*. But, the veracity of the novel remains in the fact that it did have a lasting impression upon the generations to come and inspired the fight against the British Imperial Government.

Vande Matram continued to inspire and even became an anthem of resistance and protest against the British. The novel, therefore, is important for the successful creation of an atmosphere in a particular period of history, suffused with the nationalistic sentiment. Rabindranath Tagore in his conversation with Mulk Raj Anand exclaims, "This novel is a legend of the struggle for freedom, and the passion behind it seems to reflect Bankim's vision of free India" (qtd. *Anandamath*, trnsld Basanta Koomar Roy 15).

However, the Sanyasi rebellion is not a peaceful, non-violent protest, instead is an armed one, a form of militant nationalism which is rooted in religion. *Anandamath*, a tale of bravery, machismo and violence, attempts to synchronise *Dharma*-- duty-- and militant form of nationalism into one discourse that would later find strong expression in Aurobindo Ghosh's views on nationalism, when he states in his speeches from 1908, "Nationalism is not a mere political programme; Nationalism is a religion that has come from God; Nationalism is a creed which you shall have to live" (*Bande Matram*, 118). Therefore, it becomes the duty, the *Dharma* of these *Sanyasis* to fight for dignity and to restore the lost glory of their Mother, their birthland.

Historians have differing views regarding the Sanyasi Rebellion. While some call it a band of robbers, some look at the rebellion as the first act of transgression against the British

after they were given the right to collect taxes after the Battle of Plassey.

Mahendra Simha, one of the Children of The Mother, calls the *Sanyasi* a robber, when he first sees Bhabananda fighting the *Sepoys*, and further exclaims to him, "But a bad job! Banditry no less!" (*Anandamath* 143). Through the voice of Mahendra, one finds the voice of the common people. This view of the bandits is found in most of the texts written around the time and by transforming the story of a band of robbers as a creed of *Sanyasis* fighting for reclaiming the lost glory of the *Matrabhumi*, the Motherland, Chatterjee subverts the 'academic' history given by the British authorities at the time. Through *Anandamath*, he created a new breed of rebels - though fictitious - called the *Santans* to replace the historical *Sanyasis*. It is his construction of 'truth'.

Through the fictionalisation of a particular historical event, there is wish fulfilment on part of Chatterjee of how things should be. The historicity, or the potential history --of how things could have been and what if things had been in this manner-- is equally important because it gives hope and allows the existence of a sequence of narrative which is otherwise not possible. Chatterjee subverts by challenging the 'official' version of history as presented by the English, since he believed they exaggerated the facts of their bravery in official documents and thus caricatured them when he writes: "Captain Thomas instantly sent a report to Kolkata declaring that with a force of 157 sepoys he had overcome 14,700 rebels: 2,153 rebels had been killed, 1,233 wounded, and 7 taken prisoner (Only the last was true.)" (190). This becomes Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's act of protest and serving the Mother as her *Santan*.

In the novel, the ideology of patriotism mainly rests upon the militant practices of these *Sanyasis* and are justified through the example from religious tales and scriptures. Satyananda justifies the violence that the Children indulge in by saying, "the mark of the authentic Vaishnava practice is subduing the evildoer and rescuing the world. For is not Vishnu himself the protector of the world!... It was he who destroyed the demons..." (179). There is no place for questioning religious faith and practices in the novel; in order to follow the *Dharmic* way of serving the Cause, questioning and rationalising the dictats is not given any space.

Satyananda's vision of the Mother has sought to identify the *Matribhumi* according to a specific criterion, which seeks to unite all people of a certain affiliation- be it religious or otherwise- and heritage together. The Children in the novel form a collective bond with each other that is created because of the way of life rooted in Vaishnavism such as celibacy, devotion to the Mother and a sense of atonement for transgressing the rules

set forth by Satyananda. These rules and principles create a foundation for the *Dharmic* and *Karmic* ways of life. However, a close reading of the novel unravels the problematics of this criterion as well.

The Children are all Hindus and there does not seem to be any place for any other religion to find itself rooted in the Motherland. In this land *Matribhumi*, only a Hindu could have the luxury of being a Child and the rest have to flee to save their lives. As soon as the battle is won over by Captain Thomas, the Children begin the process of amassing the wealth for the 'Cause' by plundering and looting the Muslim villages and killing any Muslim they can lay their hands on. The 'Cause' as defined by Jnanananda before rescuing Satyananda and Mahendra from the prison is to "to raze the city of these Muslim foreigners, and throw it into the river – to burn the enclosure of these swine and purify Mother Earth again!..." (184)

Casteism, another element of Hindu way of life and society, also forms a part of the discourse of nationalism as propagated by Satyananda in the novel. To ensure unity among the Children, the caste system is negated by him. While involving Shanti and Mahendra into the cause, Satyananda asks them to renounce their castes; and makes it clear that "the Children are of equal standing. Under the arms of this great vow there is no difference between a Brahmin and a Shudra" (181). The common cause of nationalism requires all practicing Hindus to come together and work for a common goal disregarding their caste barriers, yet, it is imperative to notice that all the Children belong to the upper castes. There are not any Children who belong to the 'Shudra' caste.

Language also forms an interesting point of entry to understanding the politics of region and governance. He makes fun of the inability of the British to speak the local language. When Mahendra is caught by the sepoys, the tipsy English officer says in Hindustani, "*Sadi karo*" (Marry him) instead of saying "*Sida karo*" (Straighten him out!) (141). Language emerges as one of the factors which make the British look ridiculous in front of the Bengali people. When Shanti in the guise of a *Vaishnavi* enters the English camp to spy and calls Major Edwards a "chump of a man" in Bengali, he asks its meaning. Then she explains to him the meaning of it as "A great general" (221-22). Through this, Chatterjee makes the English look asinine, and therefore more aloof from the local inhabitants who share a common language (263).

The identification of the birth land with Motherland promotes a feeling of unity and brotherhood among its inhabitants who belong to different social

strata by giving them a common identity. However, in this idea of the Motherland, the different social groups that are put on the same pedestal belong to the same religious group, i.e. Hinduism. Although the land is a non-living entity, yet inspired by the European ideals of a nation-state, it is personified as a Mother by the *Santans* in the novel. The idea of Mother is not a metaphorical experience but a lived experience. The Children recognize no other mother. She is seen as the essence of Shakti and Vishnu. This idea of the nation, which stems from the selective reading of history, is therefore exclusive to the identity of its members. The Children, who are the model members of this nation are all of the upper caste belonging to the same religion. The subalterns of the society who had no place in the active politics of representation at the time, find no representation, no voice even in the fictional annals of history about the Nation. It is only the centre of the society that asserts itself and claims its space. The tribal revolts against the British, which had been quite significant and loud by the time Chatterjee was writing *Anandamath*, find no mention in the text, rather, the narrative of the text which takes place the most of the time in the jungles and forests of Birbhum, does not account for the indigenous population of the aforementioned forests.

In the novel, Satyanand shows an “enchanted figure in the lap of Vishnu” (164) to Mahendra and then leads him inside the Anandamath. There are three images of the Mother in the abbey. These images depict the Mother’s past, present, and future. The Mother of the past is the Bearer of the earth, who tamed wild animals and set her throne in their dwelling place. She denotes a time of peace and harmony when all was well with the land. ‘Kali’, the second goddess, is angry and fierce because the world is drowning in the chaotic rule of the enemy. The peace and harmony that rule the land have been driven away and instead, the land has become a gravesite, so Mother now wears the garland of skulls. The third image, the Mother in future or the Mother-as-she will be is even more powerful than the Goddess of the past. She represents the warrior and protective nature of motherhood and signifies that the land will become self-sufficient to protect itself from the evils all around and will be a safe haven to those seeking shelter.

The images of the goddesses bestow the divine character upon the land. This deification of the land paints the canvas of the bond between the land and its inhabitants, like that of a mother and her children. The very concept of locating birth land as the Mother and as an entity to be revered and defended lay in the roots of the idea of the nation and nationalism which becomes an undercurrent in the novel. Though Satyananda, who could be

seen as a representative of the voice of Chatterjee, never calls his Mother as a nation. His idea of the Birthland, the Motherland is rooted in the ideals of nationalism and the concept of the nation as developed in Europe, with which he was well acquainted.

Women in the novel play a central role in the formation of the idea of the Nation. Through the characters of Kalyani and Shanti, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee presents a blueprint for his ideas about the role of women in nation-building. Kalyani comes forth as a woman who though seemingly fearful of the world and subservient to her husband and his needs when she refuses to eat food until her husband eats, yet, is the one who does not shy away from taking a grave step when she realises that Mahendra could not join the Children because of his love for his family. She drinks the poison and sacrifices herself in order to enable her husband to realise his destiny. When she is made to believe that she can never live with her husband, she refuses to become the wife of another man and shows an innate strength of character that becomes symbolic of the feminine *Shakti*.

At the same time, Shanti acts as a counterfoil to Kalyani. She has immense strength. Shanti refuses to change into a better sari and instead meets her husband Jibananda wearing rags as she believed in adorning the soul through actions. She shows no hesitation in cutting her hair short for her mission and even tears her Dhaka sari for the service of humanity. When her husband momentarily moves away from the cause, she scolds him and tells him that her happiness and respect for her husband lies in being a 'Hero's wife'. Shanti is the embodiment of Shakti in the novel. She explains to Satyananda that it is the duty of a wife to follow in the footsteps of her husband in every situation, be it household work or the service of the Mother, just as Sita followed Ram's footsteps without giving it a second thought. She further tells him just as the Pandavas could not have won the war without Draupadi by their side, she is also required to be by her husband's side so that he may fulfil his destiny.

This vision of the nation as it should be, is based on the feudal social set-up of the past, with the leader taking on the role of the feudal patriarchal lord. In the words of Jason Stanley, "The leader provides for his nation, just as in the traditional family the father is the provider. The patriarchal father's authority derives from his strength, and strength is the chief authoritarian value" (12). In a similar fashion, Satyananda takes on the role of the father-like mentor, who derives his strength from the faith he has in the devotion and subservience of the Children to the Cause. This patriarchal feudal system of nationalism functions by attributing to the nation, a

form of Goddess which needs to be taken care of, revered, and defended at all costs -even at the cost of loss of life- which translates from worshipping the Mother to seeing the womenfolk as a manifestation of the same *Shakti*. Thus, if Shanti has to serve the Cause, she can only do so after she has passed multiple tests and has proven herself to be physically stronger than the other male Children themselves. Even with this, she cannot serve the Mother as a woman, rather the Eternal Code demands that she take on the disguise of a man, become Nabinananda from Shanti, if she wishes to serve, or become a passively active agent like Kalyani, who needs to drink poison, in order to facilitate her husband to serve the Mother.

The novel gives birth to an endless debate on the relationships among the Hindus, the Muslims, and the British and their representation by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. At the end of the novel, a mysterious *sanyasi* called the Great One endorses British rule to Satyananda. His advocacy for the English rule captures the very attitude of the Bengali *Bhadralok* in the 1880s when there was a growing disparity and alienation between the British and the Indians and it was believed that the British rule in India was a necessary evil until the Indians were in a position to manage their own affairs. Some scholars argue that Chatterjee favoured the English and portrayed them in bright colours in the novel. The tipsy British commanding officer suddenly becomes active when needed to be and even gives orders to the sepoys to group themselves into battle formation. Chatterjee appreciated this quality in the British and writes that in times of danger, unlike the Muslims, the British overcome their stupor.

At the same time, one needs to understand that while writing the novel, Chatterjee was working under the British colonial government as a government servant and it could not have been possible for him to showcase the British as the enemy of the people. Towards the end of the novel, the Great One tells Satyananda that it is the British who are in tune with the outward and the inward knowledge which is essential to existence of a harmonious being and a true *Dharmic* way of life. It is the English rule which will bring about the perfect assimilation of the internal and external harmony in the people of Bengal, therefore English rule is necessary which could have only come about because of the efforts of the Children. This conversation gives a sense of validation that Chatterjee seeks from the colonial Masters. It is because of this that the Hindu-Muslim conflicts become so conspicuous whereas the British have been shown as merely acting on behalf of the Muslim ruler.

In Chatterjee's idea of 1770s Bengal, it is because of Mir Jafar, the Muslim

ruler who has the English as his mere tax collector, that the people are suffering. Whether it is through Bhabananda who asks Captain Thomas that though the English are not the enemies of the Children, yet why are they still helping the Muslims, or through Shanti who asks an English officer the reason for their 'interference' between the clash of Hindus and Muslims, the English have been merely shown as causing a nuisance by partaking in a confrontation, they had no business in.

The Muslims, throughout the novel, are seen as an enemy, a foreign community that has come and seized control of the land of the Hindus. The English are only criticised for being in cohorts with the Muslims. There is another possible way of looking at the British-Muslim-Hindu relationship in the novel. Since Chatterjee could not have openly criticised the British and wrote about a rebellion against the British, one could argue that he does so in his own subtle subversive manner. By calling the Muslims, foreigners, a pun could be seen playing on the word itself, wherein the British could be targeted. The history of Muslim rule in India is very old and by the time Chatterjee wrote *Anandamatha*, the Muslims were well assimilated into Indian society to such an extent that they were not seen as an outsider. However, the British, who had just come to India and after the 1857 Mutiny, gained colonial control over the land, were still deemed as foreigners who needed to be rid of. As Lipner points out, "The final chapter is a chapter that urges the Indians (as led by the Hindus) to bide their time, encouraging and advising them as to how the final victory from subalternity to sovereignty could be achieved (73).

Anandamath, when translated literally means an Abbey of Bliss. This Abbey that Chatterjee portrays in the novel is made from the sacrifices of not merely men but also women. The novel is a journey of the land from being *Janmbhumi* (birthland) to *Matribhumi* (Motherland) to finally becoming *Karma* and *Dharmabhumi*, The Land of Duty. After the rebellion has been won, and victory is finally theirs to claim, Satyananda has to leave for the Himalayas in order to serve the land further. He is told by the Great One who oscillates between his role as a healer -when he revived Jibananda- to Satyananda's *guru*; to go to the Himalayas and look after the Mother from there as his work, his *Dharma* in Bengal has been done. The last instructions of the Great One thus, could be seen as Chatterjee's vision for the Nation, of which Birbhum was just a microcosm. This is Great One's and by proxy Chatterjee's vision wherein the Hindu Eternal Code is deeply ingrained in the national fabric. The idea of the Nation as presented in the novel, though may appear as inclusive of all the sections of the society irrespective of the faith, religion, caste; yet upon closer read-

ing comes across as an exclusive space, wherein the 'Other' can only be accommodated on the terms and conditions of the 'Self'. As Lipner points out, "This neo-Hinduism is not exclusive to only one sect of Hindus, but encompasses all Hindus and even Muslims, however, the Muslims are included in this vision on the terms and conditions of the Hindus" (73).

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