

those who consider both options 1 and 2 neither viable nor desirable. The first step in moving towards post-nationalism would involve shifting of the principal basis on which state claims legitimacy and asserts authority. Were the postcolonial state not to claim that it represents a nation and its national interests, it would simply not matter whether the state is national, sub-national, multinational or supra-national. It would be a good state or a bad state depending on how efficient it functionally is in establishing rule of law and maintaining

order, securing the lives of its citizens and respecting their human rights, promoting development and welfare, etc. The state will be like a corporation, whether municipal or multinational, which provides services not to nations but to its 'clientele' and is judged in similar terms.

This foundational shift in the claims made by the state cannot but in turn fundamentally affect the claims of nationhood-claiming ethnic groups. There will be no distinct advantage left in aspiring or claiming to be a nation. It

would simply not advance its case for a separate statehood if the state of which it is presently a part is a good state judged by the criteria suggested above. On the other hand, if the state of which it is presently a part is bad, the ethnic group will not need to prove it is a nation in order to justify its move to secede. Nationhood will not be the basis of demanding or withdrawing political obedience.

Bhupinder Brar is Professor of Political Science, Panjab University, Chandigarh

Critical Observations on Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* [1882]

by AMIYA P. SEN

It would indeed appear to be somewhat ironical that a work which became virtually synonymous with militant nationalism in India and greatly contributed to Bankimchandra's fame as a novelist is generally not rated very highly within the general corpus of his writings. In terms of either sophistication in plot or literary artistry, it compares rather poorly with Bankim's other novels such as *Durgeshnandini*, *Bishbriksha*, *Mrinalini*, or *Krishnakanter Will*. Its immediate impact on contemporary Bengali or Indian life too was quite negligible. The civilian Romesh Chandra Dutt once made the apt remark that the patriotic cry of *Bande Mataram*, extremely popular during the anti-partition agitation in Bengal, was seldom, if ever, used during the time that it was composed and made public through the novel. For instance, it does not seem to have been used during the two major public controversies of the period viz. the Ilbert Bill agitation and the contempt case involving the nationalist leader Surendranath Bannerjee. Dutt was also to make the point that the 'evil notoriety' that the song acquired during the *Swadeshi* days was far from the intention of its author. "That

Bankimchandra himself foresaw or desired any such use of it", Dutt wrote, "is impossible to believe."

In 1908, in a book titled *Indian Problems*, a fellow Bengali, S.M. Mitra observed that Bankim composed the novel 'in a fit of patriotic excitement, after a good hearty dinner which he always enjoyed'.

There was in fact, a school of thought which maintained that the idea or the imagery employed in *Anandamath* was specifically focused on Bengal and Bengalis. Here, Bankimchandra was seen to be the founder of a healthy Bengali provincialism, not as palpable in the writings of earlier writers, poets or novelists such as Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Rangalal Bandopadhyay or Hemchandra Bandopadhyay who were more enthused by the heroism of the Rajputs and the Marathas. The so called 'Santans' of *Anandamath*, on the other hand are typically Bengali in their values and sensibility and use cultural ideas or artefacts that are palpably drawn from traditional Bengali life. This, incidentally, was also the opinion of knowledgeable European writers and observers like Henry Cotton and George A. Grierson. The latter, in particular, also made the

interesting point that the metaphor of the country as the 'Mother' was in fact quite untypical of traditional Hinduism. The poet Kalidas for example, likened the country and the world to the 'Father'/'Fatherland' viz. *Jagate Pitorou Bando, Parvati Parameswara*.

We know for a fact that *Anandamath* was begun at a time when Bankim was transferred from his charge at Hoogly to Howrah. This coincided with certain unpleasant experiences as soon after he joined his new charge, Bankim ran into some trouble with his superior, C.E. Buckland, the District Collector. This was also a period of personal tragedy as his father, Jadav-chandra, also a member of the sub-ordinate bureaucracy, passed away. There are moreover, various explanations about the possible inspiration behind the work. The well known historian B.B. Majumdar believed that Bankim was inspired by the rebellion led by Vasudev Balwant Phadke in Maharashtra in 1866-67. The historical linkages between mal-administration and popular rebellion as evident in the case of Phadke and as depicted in *Anandamath* however has historical precedents. In the Persian classic *Siyar-ul-Mutakhkherin*, the

author, Syed Gholam Hossain Tabtabai tells us how the Punjab peasantry embraced Sikhism by way of seeking relief from prolonged oppression by the Indo Muslim ruling class. It is quite probable that Bankim was aware of Phadke's rebellion but the overarching conclusion of *Anandamath* as we shall presently see, comes closer to the observations of Tabtabai. It is now widely accepted that the most tangible inspiration for the work was derived from the widespread popular rebellion that affected parts of north Bengal and Bihar in the 1770s, reacting against prolonged famine conditions and its particularly inept and insensitive handling by the officials of the East India Company and its Indian agents. What is somewhat intriguing here is the way Bankimchandra altered vital historical details even as he used a historical episode for the purposes of the novel. Thus, whereas the uprisings affected north Bengal and Bihar, Bankim locates these in Birbhum in south central Bengal with no comparable history of popular insurrection. Given the somewhat contrived and dramatic nature of the plot one cannot help wondering if 'Birbhum' is only an allegory for 'Birbhumi'—the land of the brave. The point however, is that the deliberate change of historical details does not, in any way, enhance the literary or aesthetic quality of the novel and one may indeed ponder over what exactly Bankim might have gained with a change of venue or the names of some principal historical characters. It might of course be argued that his status as a civil servant put severe constraints upon Bankim's literary freedom. In successive revisions that he carried out of *Ananda-math* in his own lifetime, Bankim did in fact insert significant changes. Thus, at several places in the novel, the adversaries of the *Santans* can be seen to change from the English to Muslims.

Anandamath paints a rather uncharitable picture of the Company's agent at Murshidabad, Muhammed Reza Khan, whereas even Bankim should have

known that the administrative lapses and the moral responsibility for what transpired during the 1770s, could more realistically be attributed to the greed, corruption and insensitivity in the higher ranks of the Company's servants. Such facts are actually brought out quite sharply by the correspondence between the Court of Directors and the Bengal administration or other related official publications and could not have been entirely hidden from our author. What makes Bankim's portrayals doubly perplexing is the fact that in 1886, in response to public pressure, he did furnish historical details regarding the so called Sanyasi rebellions of the 1770s, drawing upon official publications such as Gleig's *Memories of the Life of Warren Hastings* and Hunter's *Annals of Rural Bengal* which make it amply clear that it was the complicity of the Company officials that resulted in an unprecedented rural crisis that wiped out virtually a third of Bengal's population and left the countryside ravaged and in a state of utter deprivation. Thus, if the incidence of rural taxation was in fact increased at a time the Bengal countryside was in the grip of severe famine, the responsibility for the act could not be pinned down on Muhammed Reza Khan, who, as was made clear in his deposition, was only acting upon orders. Thus, while there would have been some official pressure on him, it has also to be admitted alongside that the *Anandamath* reflects Bankim's rather naive acceptance of certain postulates incipient in Whig-Positivist historiography such as the idea that Indo-Muslim rule represented a dark interlude in Indian history and that the British had indeed rescued Bengal and India from anarchy and intellectual stagnation. What might have further strengthened this acceptance is the collective memory that the Bengali intelligentsia rightly or wrongly held about the Bengali past. Purnachandra Chattopadhyay, Bankim's younger brother recalled how Jadvachandra would often narrate gory anecdotes form

the 'Manwantar' [the period of distress and famine] and how Bankimchandra, in particular, remembered such episodes quite vividly. In the *Anandamath* then, Bankimchandra would in fact appear to indulge in deliberate double-play—diluting history but also historicising what hitherto remained inchoate at the level of collective memory. Bankim claimed to avoid history but actually ended up sensitizing the educated Bengalis about their perceived past. In the novel, the Hindus seem to be affected by a strong sense of being wronged—a feeling that is at once intense and pervasive. There are, for instance, passages in *Anandamath* where one encounters not aggrieved subjects resorting to legitimate protest against an irresponsible administration, but the unleashing of bitter communal violence whereby one community wrecks its vengeance upon another. In part III, chapter 7 of the novel, Hindus are seen to even contemplate demolishing mosques to give way to Hindu temples. All this resonates with occurrences closer to our time. On the other hand, in *Anandamath* itself, the Muslim *per se* has become [to use a currently fashionable turn of phrase] the 'other'.

Bankim also indulges in certain unique reconstructions of Hindu history and tradition. Whereas historically, the *Sanyasi* insurgents who led the rebellion in the 1770s were Saivite ascetics [Naga *Sanyasis*], Bankim's characters are distinctly Vaishnav in their cultural or religious orientation. Their invocations [as in the use of *Dashavatar* verses from Jaideb's *Geet Gobinda*] are peculiarly Vaishnav. The term *Santan*, on the other hand, is peculiarly *Sakta* [originating in the cult of *Sakti*]. In *Anandamath*, the *Santans* fancy themselves as the children of a feminine deity [Mother] while also paying respect to Vishnu. This would indeed appear to be a case of deliberate syncretism as also an effort to overlook the *Sakta*-Vaishnav controversy that gripped late medieval Bengal. For a man who was consciously trying to create Bengali self-reflexivity and a new homogenized religious identity for

Bengali Hindus, such syncretic reconstructions would indeed appear to make sense. What does appear somewhat incongruent though is Bankim's attempt to employ the category of the *Santan* within the emotive-religious framework of Vaishnavism. Traditionally, Vaishnavism in Bengal and elsewhere, had a very different concept of the relationship between man and deity. It showered parental affection upon God [*Vatsalya*] rather than fancy oneself as his child. *Saktaism*, on the contrary, relied very heavily upon mother-imageries and thus became more amenable to such usage. The iconography that Bankim employs in *Anandamath* is again an inexplicable mix of the *Sakta* and the Vaishnav, with the feminine deity [Mother] being seated on the lap of the male god Vishnu. This, one has to say, conforms neither to the Vaishnav or Sakta ontological or metaphysical conceptions. Here, one can only speculate that the feminine figure is no deity but the 'Motherland' entrusted to the protective custody of Vishnu. Again, in part I, Chapter 11 of the novel, the author also comes up with the rather startling claim that the garland of human heads that adorns the popular Bengali goddess Kali only reflects the ravaged state of the Bengali countryside. With Bankim Hindu iconography was certainly being put to political uses.

The choice of Vishnu as a protective deity is both interesting and critically important to Bankim's discourse. In Hindu mythology, Vishnu is indeed the slayer of demonic forces and entrusted with the protection of the world-order. But such qualities were also associated with his more popular incarnations like Krishna who, incidentally, was the revered deity in Bengal Vaishnavism. Krishna, on the other hand, would have posed a problem for Bankimchandra as it would for most Babu-Victorians since the amorous love-plays and the eroticized songs/ imagery associated with him rendered him a morally suspect figure. In the 1880s, importantly, Bankimchandra, went on to produce two major works, the

Krishnacharitra and the *Dharmatattwa*, to put before the western-educated Bengali, a much sanitized Krishna-figure that would not only stand up to moral critiques coming from Christian missionaries but also be celebrated as a perfect man. Nascent Indian nationhood and a morally perfect religion thus become fused in the writings of Bankimchandra and here, *Anandamath* is no exception.

Prima facie *Anandamath* would appear to end on a strongly loyalist note for in it the rebels and insurrectionists are not only dissuaded from pushing their rebellion further but to actually accept the positive conditions created by the consolidation of British rule. The first edition of *Anandamath* was prefaced by the following remarks from the author:

... By unleashing a revolution, a society sometimes inflicts only pain and injury upon itself. The English have indeed rescued Bengal from a state of anarchy. This novel sets out to explain such matters.

In *Anandamath* and in the contemporaneous work, *Dharmatattwa*, Bankim was to develop what was eventually to become a favourite rhetoric of modern Hindu discourse—the polarities of a 'spiritual' India and 'materialist' West. In the novel itself, the decision to accept the political supremacy of British also reflects a pragmatic and realistic assessment of the situation. In a sense, such decisions arrive at the end of deep reflexivity and introspection which makes it possible for Bankim to accept the fact, albeit not ungrudgingly that Indian modernization cannot be effectively separated from political and intellectual tutelage of the British. Alternative and indigenous paths of modernization do not clearly surface in his writings. This however, does not make him any less patriotic. In retrospect, it would rather appear as though Bankim was disappointed and disillusioned at the trajectory or the force of Bengali patriotism. In a letter written to his friend, Kali Prosonno Ghosh, Editor of the well-known Bengali journal, *Bandhab*, the

author of *Anandamath* was to write the following:

Of what use is my writing *Anandamath* or even your attempt to understand its underlying message? I see no future for a self-seeking and a greatly disunited people as the Bengalis. Instead of the slogan 'Hail Mother' [*Bande Mataram*], let us cry out 'Glory to the Belly'

[*Bande Udaram*]

The hint thrown in *Anandamath* was further developed by Bankim-chandra in the work *Dharmatattwa* [1888] where there is the suggestion of a mutual necessity of India and West learning the best of one another. The West needed to learn spirituality from the age old and highly sublime spiritual traditions of India whereas India, intellectually isolated from the finest developments in the modern philosophy, crafts and science must seek help from the West in such matters. In the 19th century India, the most well known spokesman of this rhetoric is of course Swami Vivekananda particularly after his historic trip to the West but here surely, he is greatly indebted to Bankim. In terms of his overarching philosophy and understanding of contemporary India, Bankim really stood at the crossroads between tradition and inexorable challenges of modernity. Intellectually, he belonged neither to the conservative camp which naively dismissed the several challenges posed by the coming of the modern West, nor an uncritical enthusiast of Western modernity. If *Anandamath* as also some of his other well known writings appear to be somewhat contrived, it was chiefly because of Bankim's attempt to recast traditional categories of thought into modern idiom. Here the attempt itself should be seen as a significant step taken by tradition to constructively negotiate with modernity. The results thereof, one would think, were relatively less important.

Amiya P. Sen is Fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi