

Contextualising *Vande Mataram*

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Amidst the heat of recent controversy over the compulsory singing of *Vande Mataram* in the government run schools, the real issue has been completely lost sight of—the historical context in which Bankim Chandra Chatterjee composed it and its link with a particular political ideology. Understanding this context is necessary in order to know why the proponents of Hindutva consider it as a major symbol of genuine ‘national’ awakening. Muslims fear it as a frontal assault on their religio-cultural identity as evident from Ali Mian’s edict to withdraw Muslim wards from those government run schools where it is sung. The Muslim fear in turn creates lurking doubts in ‘nationalist’ minds about their loyalty to India. The central question, therefore, is not whether or not the state should make the recitation of *Vande Mataram* obligatory for schoolchildren, as the armchair ‘secularists’ conveniently argue, but rather whether *Vande Mataram* really represents authentic nationalism.

But before we historically situate it, some facts are in order. First, Bankim wrote the song *Vande Mataram* in 1875. Later, when Bankim had finished the much acclaimed novel *Anand-math*, he inserted the song within the story. With its inclusion in the

novel, it acquired a new political meaning from its context. It became an integral part of a story woven around the theme of a weak Hindu nation, with Muslims being recurring negative points of reference. The song, therefore, cannot be detached from the political context of the novel. A text without context is a fairy tale. Second, it was not only a rallying cry for the nationalists in the anti-colonial struggle but also a powerful Hindu slogan sung during Hindu-Muslim violence. According to Tanika Sarkar, a historian of modern India, it was chanted during the riots of 1926.

Rightly regarded as one of the towering personalities of the Bengal renaissance in 19th

century India and also as the creator of the Bangla novel, Bankim Chandra (1838-94) was essentially a political visionary. His main concern, especially in the latter phase of his life, was to give his diagnosis of the reasons for the downfall of Hindu glory, recast Hindu religious traditions in these changed circumstances and use the results to fashion a new Hindu political identity. Bankim’s new approach marked a sharp and radical departure from all the previous reformer thinkers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), who sought to harmonise traditional religions with modern European ideas. In Bankim’s new version of Hinduism, religion ceased to be an agency for spiritual salvation. It no longer remained a medium of dialogue between man and the ultimate. Instead it became a means of creating a virulent Hindu nation that he intended for remedying what he viewed as two daunting challenges: the internal weakness of Hinduism and a tyranny of Islam and Muslims over Hindus.

The weakness of Hinduism, as he saw it, was its quietism and perhaps its undue stress on the spirit. No wonder then, he had no sympathy for Vedic Vendantist philosophy, as it did not support his politically militant, even violent, heroic agenda. Nothing demonstrates this point more starkly than his portrayal



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of the Bhakti movement. For him, the Bhakti-Sufi traditions, shining symbols of a composite culture, meant nothing but submission and passivity. In his new interpretation he replaced Krishna, the lover, the devotee, by Krishna the politician, the warrior.

As for Muslims, in all Bankim's writings one can discern a condescending attitude towards them. In the last phase of his life he produced three major novels—*Sitaram*, *Mrinalini* and the masterpiece *Anandmath*. They are all marked by a deep-rooted hatred against Muslims, who are blamed for the downfall of Hindu glory. He invokes his own version of Indian history to contrast with the present day status of Hindus. His version is selective and aggressive against Muslims. For him, ideal Hindu society existed much before the Muslim 'invasion', hence he offers no reference to the medieval era in India in which different cultures intermingled and fashioned a new vibrant synthesis out of them. India is symbolised as *Bharat Mata* and *Bharat Mata* is exclusively equated with Hindu religion and culture.

It is the worship of sacred *Bharat Mata* which is the theme of *Anandmath* (1882). Fired by his zeal to deify the Motherland, the hero of the novel invites his friend Mahendra to support his holy mission. The invitation begins with the hymn *Vande Mataram*. On being asked by Mahendra what it means, the hero tells him it means their religion is ruined, their honour destroyed. They cannot save Hinduism unless the Muslims are driven out. Unconvinced, Mahendra hesitates. He is then taken to the temple of *Anandmath*. Pointing

towards the goddess, the priest asks Mahendra who she is. The priest himself answers by saying that she is the Mother and we are all her sons. He then asks Mahendra to sing *Vande Mataram*. Elsewhere in the novel, a roaring slogan "slay the Muslims" is raised with the echo of *Vande Mataram* in the background. At yet another place, the mob of loyal *santaans* (progeny) of the Motherland cry "Unless we throw these dirty bastards [Muslims] out, Hindus will be ruined... When shall we raze mosques down to the ground and erect Radhamadhav's temples in their place?" (*Bankim Rachnabali* vol.1 Calcutta, 1953, p.768) "Kill the Muslims," says Tanika Sarkar, "is the refrain that is repeatedly raised in *Anandmath*."

No one who has seriously studied Bankim can repudiate his rabidly militant, anti-Muslim harangue in *Anandmath*. *Vande Mataram* is supposed to serve as a rallying cry for the 'true' *santaans* of the Motherland. The story, however, does not stop here. In post-independence India, the RSS, which has more than an ideological affinity with Bankim's

new definition of Hinduism, adopted this song as truly representative of Hindu culture and nationalism. In fact, for it *Vande Mataram* is more authentic than Tagore's *Jana Gana Mana*, which is the accepted anthem of the Indian republic. The hymn in its entirety is religiously sung in the daily *Shakhas* of the RSS, an organisation whose attitude towards non-Hindus is too well known to be repeated here.

It is thus amply clear that Bankim's hymn in the novel as also its aggressive advocacy by the RSS is politically motivated since Muslims are sweepingly identified as the adversary. A nationalism which deliberately stigmatises Muslims as 'swine' and 'the other' can by no means be an inclusive nationalism uniting under its fold the diverse communities that inhabit this country. Muslims are as much part of this great nation as any other religious community and hence their loyalty to India is beyond the narrow litmus test of *Vande Mataram*. □

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