



The Politics Of Identity In Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandmath* And The Indian Struggle For Independence

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Abstract

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandmath* (1882), a significant literary work of 19th-century Bengali literature, is often regarded as a crucial text in the intellectual and cultural development of modern India. The novel is set against the backdrop of the 1770s, during the time of the British colonial rule in India. It portrays the emergence of a nationalist movement and reflects the socio-political landscape of India under British oppression. This paper explores the politics of identity in *Anandmath*, focusing on the construction of Hindu identity and its role in the Indian struggle for independence. By examining themes such as religious identity, cultural nationalism, and the role of myth, the paper argues that Chatterjee's work played a pivotal role in shaping the political discourse around identity in the Indian independence movement.

Keywords: Hindu Nationalism, Cultural Identity, Indian Independence, Anandmath

Introduction

Anandmath is a narrative that fuses historical events with a sense of religious and cultural revivalism. Written during a period of intense colonial rule, the novel reflects the tensions and aspirations of a society grappling with the realities of foreign domination. At its core, *Anandmath* presents a story of a secret society of sannyasis (ascetics) who engage in an armed rebellion against the British colonialists. Through the character of the leader of the sannyasis, Mahendra, and the central hymn "Vande Mataram," Chatterjee introduces a powerful call for national unity rooted in religious and cultural identity.

The politics of identity in *Anandmath* are deeply intertwined with the narrative of resistance against colonial rule. Chatterjee's portrayal of Hindu identity becomes an ideological tool for the nationalist movement, and the novel serves as a significant text for understanding the evolution of Indian nationalism during the colonial period. This paper explores the ways in which Chatterjee constructs identity in the novel and its political implications for the Indian struggle for independence.

Religious Identity and the Construction of the Nation

One of the central themes in *Anandmath* is the use of religious identity as a basis for national unity. Chatterjee constructs Hinduism as the core of Indian identity, emphasizing its cultural and spiritual heritage as the foundation for the resistance against British colonialism. The novel's portrayal of the sannyasis as defenders of Hindu values positions religion as a unifying force that transcends regional and social divisions within India. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee uses Hinduism as a central pillar around which the concept of national identity is built, drawing upon the cultural and spiritual elements of the religion to unify a diverse Indian society under the banner of resistance against colonial oppression. The novel emphasizes the idea of

a unified Hindu nation, positioning religion not only as a spiritual belief system but also as a political tool in the fight for independence.

The figure of the sannyasi, a renunciant warrior, becomes symbolic of the Indian nationalist movement. The ascetic lifestyle, which eschews material wealth in favor of spiritual strength, aligns with the idea of a self-reliant nation free from foreign domination. The sannyasis in *Anandmath* are not merely religious figures but political agents who challenge British rule. By presenting Hinduism as a force for both spiritual and political resistance, Chatterjee encourages a reimagining of the Indian identity as one rooted in its indigenous cultural and religious traditions.

Chatterjee's portrayal of Hinduism in *Anandmath* is not just a passive reflection of the religious landscape of the time; it is actively constructed as a form of resistance to the British Empire. The sannyasis, the protagonists of the novel, are presented as embodiments of Hindu spirituality and valor. Their asceticism, their renunciation of worldly possessions, and their commitment to the protection of dharma (righteousness) serve as metaphors for the nation's struggle to reclaim its identity from foreign rulers. The ascetic's withdrawal from materialism, and their focus on inner strength, reflects the nation's need to rediscover its moral and cultural foundation in the face of British exploitation and cultural imperialism.

Chatterjee's novel suggests that India's true strength lies in its spiritual heritage, and that the nation's resistance to colonialism must be framed not merely as a political struggle, but as a spiritual and cultural revival. The Hindu nationalist narrative in *Anandmath* centers on the notion that the British, by undermining Hindu culture and religion, have not only physically occupied India but have also eroded the spiritual fabric of the nation. Thus, the sannyasis, as warriors of both the spirit and the body, represent the potential for India to awaken from the colonial subjugation and reassert its cultural and spiritual power.

Moreover, Chatterjee's portrayal of Hinduism in *Anandmath* contrasts with the British colonial view of India as a land of backwardness and superstition. The novel's emphasis on Hindu identity can be seen as an act of reclaiming cultural pride and asserting the political legitimacy of Indian civilization in the face of colonial degradation.

The religious symbolism in *Anandmath* is also tied to the concept of the motherland, *Bharat Mata*, which emerges as a central figure in the nationalist imagination. The motherland, often personified as the goddess Kali, symbolizes both fertility and destruction, protection and vengeance. The novel's central hymn, *Vande Mataram*, which invokes the motherland as a divine figure, crystallizes this vision of India as a goddess who must be protected from the ravages of foreign rule. The imagery of the motherland as a nurturing yet powerful deity appeals to the emotional and spiritual sensibilities of the masses, and it draws upon deeply rooted religious and cultural beliefs to create a powerful sense of national pride.

By intertwining religious identity with the political struggle for independence, Chatterjee makes a compelling case for the idea that the colonial project was not merely an economic or political conquest but also a cultural and religious one. In this context, Hinduism is not simply a religious doctrine but a cultural resource that can unite the Indian people in their fight for freedom. The politics of identity in *Anandmath* is thus grounded in the idea of reclaiming a lost cultural and spiritual heritage, one that has been threatened by British colonialism and its attendant cultural hegemony.

The novel also presents the idea that the construction of the nation is inherently linked to the revival of Hindu religious values. In *Anandmath*, the idea of Hinduism is portrayed as being not only a personal faith but a collective force that can unite people from diverse regions, castes, and communities under the common cause of nationalism. This vision of a unified India, rooted in a singular religious identity, seeks to overcome the divisive effects of colonial rule, which had fractured the social and political fabric of Indian society.

However, while Chatterjee's novel emphasizes Hindu identity as a central unifying force, it also implicitly suggests that the process of nation-building involves the exclusion of other religious identities. The focus on Hinduism as the basis for Indian nationalism marginalizes the contributions of other communities, particularly Muslims and Dalits, who had their own struggles against colonial rule. This tension within the

narrative highlights the challenges of creating a national identity that is both inclusive and representative of India's diverse cultural and religious landscape.

In sum, *Anandmath* presents religious identity as the foundation of a nationalist consciousness, with Hinduism positioned as both a cultural and spiritual resource for the resistance against colonialism. The novel reflects a moment in Indian history when religious and cultural identity were being reimagined as tools for political resistance. However, it also raises important questions about the inclusivity of such a vision, which would continue to shape the political discourse in India long after the novel was written.

Cultural Nationalism and the Role of Myth

In *Anandmath*, myth plays a significant role in shaping the political narrative of resistance. The novel draws heavily on Hindu mythology, particularly the story of the goddess Kali, to symbolize the divine power that is awakened to combat the British. The invocation of Kali and the focus on her destructive, yet protective, nature resonate with the nationalist ideology that seeks to overthrow the foreign oppressors and restore India's ancient glory.

The novel also introduces the concept of *matribhumi* (motherland) as a sacred and inviolable entity, represented by the figure of the mother goddess. The central hymn "Vande Mataram," which praises the motherland, encapsulates this idea of national unity, and it became a rallying cry for the Indian nationalist movement. The idea of the motherland as a divine, nurturing figure calls on the people to protect and defend their land from foreign invaders. In this sense, *Anandmath* can be seen as an attempt to politicize cultural and religious symbols, using them to forge a collective national identity that transcends religious and regional differences.

By invoking these cultural and religious symbols, Chatterjee taps into the emotional and psychological dimensions of Indian identity. The mythic representations of India as a goddess, both nurturing and fierce, provide a compelling image of the nation's struggle for independence. The political message is clear: India's salvation lies in reclaiming its ancient cultural and religious heritage, which had been undermined by centuries of foreign rule.

Hindu Identity and the Question of Inclusivity

While *Anandmath* is an important text for understanding the development of Hindu nationalism, it is also important to consider the implications of Chatterjee's portrayal of identity. The emphasis on Hinduism as the basis for Indian nationalism raises questions about the inclusivity of the movement. The novel presents a vision of India that is predominantly Hindu, with limited attention to the religious and cultural diversity of the subcontinent.

This exclusionary aspect of Chatterjee's vision of nationalism has been the subject of significant debate. Critics argue that the focus on Hindu identity in *Anandmath* marginalizes other religious and cultural communities, particularly Muslims and Dalits, who were integral to the struggle for independence. The narrow focus on Hindu identity in the novel can be seen as a precursor to the religious divisions that would later characterize the political landscape of India, especially in the context of partition and the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 20th century.

Despite this limitation, it is important to recognize that *Anandmath* was written in a specific historical context, where the idea of a unified Hindu identity was seen as a necessary rallying point for resistance against colonial rule. Chatterjee's work reflects the complexities and contradictions of the nationalist movement, where the need for unity often required the consolidation of identity around a singular cultural and religious framework.

The Legacy of *Anandmath* in the Indian Independence Movement

The impact of *Anandmath* on the Indian struggle for independence cannot be overstated. The novel's emphasis on religious identity and cultural nationalism provided an ideological foundation for the rise of Hindu nationalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The themes of resistance and national pride

resonated with many leaders of the independence movement, including those associated with the Hindu Mahasabha and other nationalist organizations.

The iconic hymn "Vande Mataram" became a symbol of the nationalist movement and was adopted by leaders like Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Congress. The novel's portrayal of the sannyasis as freedom fighters, sacrificing their lives for the nation, inspired generations of Indians to join the struggle for independence.

However, the novel also foreshadows the tensions that would later arise in the political discourse of independent India. The focus on Hindu identity in *Anandmath* contributed to the rise of religious nationalism, which would later become a significant force in Indian politics. While the novel played a crucial role in mobilizing the masses for the freedom struggle, it also laid the groundwork for the divisive politics of identity that would emerge in the post-independence era.

Conclusion

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandmath* remains a powerful text for understanding the politics of identity in the Indian struggle for independence. Through its portrayal of Hindu religious identity, cultural nationalism, and the use of myth, the novel provides a compelling vision of resistance against colonial rule. However, it also raises important questions about the inclusivity of nationalism and the role of religious identity in shaping the political landscape of modern India. *Anandmath*'s legacy continues to influence contemporary debates about identity, nationalism, and the role of religion in Indian politics, making it a crucial text for understanding the complexities of India's journey to independence.

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