

**The Portrayal of Self-Sacrificing Love for the Motherland:
A Study of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anand Math***

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Abstract

Indian novelist, poet and journalist, Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838-1894) is widely known as *Sahitya Smrat* [Emperor of Literature] in Bengali. *Anand Math* is considered one of his most significant novels in which he presents the heroic accomplishments of the ascetics under the leadership of Swami Satyanand who manages to hold the courage of his rebels even during the adverse circumstances against the Muslim ruler's local army as well as in front of the strategic plans of the British commanders. This paper will analyze that how deprivation, starvation, and oppression of the poor result in the endless, ever-growing self-sacrificing love for the motherland i.e. Bengal. It will also showcase that how the implementation of the heartless decisions by the rulers i.e. administrative faults on part of Muslim Rulers and oppression in matters of revenue collection on part of the British turn a stratum of society into protesters who seek abolition of such a rule by liberating their motherland from them without paying any heed to their sufferings or comforts.

Keywords: Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Anand Math*, starvation, oppression, self-sacrificing love, motherland, protesters

After the Original publication in Bengali in 1882, *Anand Math* got published in several languages including English. It is set in Bengal in the late 18th Century projecting the clashes of the *sanyasis* [ascetics] with the army of the local Muslim ruler and with the British army. *Anand Math* or the hermitage is situated amidst the dense forest in the hills. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee projects Satyanand as the leader of the rebels and chief of the *sanyasis* in the hermitage, plays the pivotal role in arousing the patriotic sentiments among the natives of Bengal, the motherland. The *sanyasis* are called the children of Lord Vishnu or the motherland. The opening of the novel introduces the readers to the famine of Bengal and its aftermaths in the form of starvation, abject

helplessness compelling people to loot anyone anywhere for survival reminding Charles Darwin's doctrine, i.e. survival of the fittest. Under repeated series of utter helplessness, people start looking for alternatives for their survival. Whosoever has a bit of possession become insecure even in homes. Such a sense of insecurity compels Mahendra and his wife Kalyani to leave their home in Padchihn in a hope of some safer place towards the city along with their little daughter Sukumari, But the circumstances lead Mahendra to have oath being a Sanyasi until the goal is reached, and separates from his family for a larger purpose of liberating the motherland. He meets Bhavanand, Satyanand, Jeevanand there in the hermitage. Besides, Shanti, Jeevanand's wife in the disguise of Naveenanand contributes equally to the plot. They are not the real Sanyasis in the real terms who remain dependent by begging alms, but they have a mission, and the mission is to bring emancipation from the atrocities of the local Muslim ruler and the financial exploitation of the British. As much as the oppression gets increased, the ascetic's love for their motherland also increases and by renouncing their comforts, familial responsibilities for the sake of their larger duty towards the motherland they devote their lives.

The beginning of the British colonization of India is traced back to the battle of Plassey in 1757 with the defeat of the Nawab of Bengal, Seraj-ud-Daulah by the governor of East India Company, Lord Clive (Chandra 64). The disloyal and treacherous conduct of Mir Jafar and some other chief commanders of the Nawab had paved a way for the victory of the British Company as Mir Jafar had been offered the new Nawab of Bengal on the Company's terms. Through the new puppet Nawab, the Company started monopolizing the in trade, and commerce in the Province as per terms and conditions (Grover 51). Thereafter, the implementation of the dual government in Bengal (1765-1772) invited resistance from the native masses, especially from the farmers. The dual system fixed the responsibility of the administration of Bengal with the Nawab whereas the right to collect revenues was given to the Company. As a result, the masses were exploited in both ways. Nawab had no power to enforce law and justice while the English disowned the responsibility of the government. All resulted in disorder and anarchy (Mahajan, 126). Bankim Chandra Chatterjee depicts the events realistically as, "realism is said to represent the life as it really is" (Abrams 333) by projecting the reasons for the Sanyasi Rebellion in the late 18th Century India.

The novelist shows that how a natural calamity turns people helpless with starvation deteriorating their health with diseases compels them to find alternatives for their survival. He writes, "Harvest was not good in the Bengali year 1174, so famine was struck in 1175, Indians were in trouble, but the rulers collected all the revenues up to the last penny and poor people had to live on just one meal a day because they paid all the money added by saving each penny as tax" (10). It reveals that the common masses remain with nothing to eat. Earlier they manage by skipping a meal in a day, later by skipping both the meals in a day. Henceforth, the situation

compels them to survive by begging, and when there remains nobody to give the food, people start selling their possessions like cattle, land, property “even their children and wives” (10). But in such a situation no buyers are there. When nothing grains remain, people start eating tree leaves. Some lower caste people attempt to live by eating the flesh of rats, cats, dogs and fall ill because of starvation and some die by eating inedible items. For the sake of survival, people turn dacoits. Mahendra Singh, one of the wealthiest persons of Padchihn who has lost all his family members and relatives in his village decides to move to the city along with his young daughter Sukumari on his wife’s insistence as she feels quite unsafe and insecure in her house. The famine compels people to come up with alternatives in life. While going towards the town Mahendra leaves Kalyani and his daughter in a forlorn house and moves out to arrange to quench their thirst and fire of their stomach in the dusk, as he goes out finds no one in the town as everyone has left for some safer places. When Mahendra returns with a pot of milk, the robbers had already taken away his wife and daughter to a forest with which he was not acquainted. After looting and sharing Kalyani’s jewellery, the robbers discuss what to do with Kalyani and the kid, “Once everybody took their share of the loot, one robber said, what do we do with this jewellery, let somebody take this and give us food every day to eat, hunger is taking our lives, even today in the morning I just ate few leaves only” (15). The starved people had no option to arrange their food, so indulged themselves in robbing and looting wherever it was possible. Even after having in possession of enough ornaments, people were unable to manage eatable grains, and people started dying out of hunger.

Even the gang leader was almost half dead due to lack of food, so he fell on the ground and died. One of those hungry, heartless, excited and suffering robbers said, “We have eaten even the flesh of a jackal, we are dying of hunger, today let’s eat the flesh of this wretched man. Everybody shouted “Jai Kali” in approval and said, “Today we are going to eat the human flesh” (15)

The forest proves a boon for the starving and helpless people as there are no crops in the fields, the forest offers some eatable things. Although due to the famine most of the people are weak and dull, still the villagers were wealthy. Villagers in that famine times survive by “eating wild fruits collected from the forest” (52).

Kalyani manages somehow to run away with her daughter from the custody of the robbers who were planning to eat her. Exhausted, she falls unconscious under a Banyan tree after being chased by the robbers. She finds herself in a huge hermitage built of stone when she opens her eyes, “She saw a great sage sitting in front of her. She looked around with surprise. She hadn’t come to the consciousness fully. Watching her, the great soul said, “daughter, this is a house of gods, no need to be afraid of, drink some milk, then we talk” (18). The sage was

Mahatma Satyanand whom she narrates the whole episode and he assigns the responsibility of searching Mahendra to one of his devotees, Bhavanand who saves him from the British guards by attacking their Cart. Bhavanand brings Mahendra to the hermitage while motivating him to join the order of the children [ascetics]. Mahendra considers it a crime to kill someone and to rob someone's money.

The hermitage runs under the revolutionary leadership of Mahatma Satyanand who leaves no stone unturned in motivating the prospective newcomers and re-strengthening the dedication of the ascetics in the hermitage. He acquaints the common masses with the root reasons responsible for the worst conditions the people of Bengal are living in. He simplifies the meaning of the new dual system of government, "Initially, collection of tax in Bengal was with the British, but the administrative duty was with the Nawab, wherever the British used to collect the tax they had appointed their own collectors. All the revenue would be sent to Kolkata. Even if the public is starving, they had to pay the tax" (22). As the duty of protecting the wealth of the people was with Mir Jafar and the hermitage automatically comes under his jurisdiction, but he used to consume opium all the time, therefore, had turned irresponsible, unfaithful, cruel and a stigma on humanity. Nothing could have been expected from him. As result anarchy and disorder prevail. When the British do not compensate even a single penny of the starving people, people turn dacoits start looting wherever it is possible. They even loot the cart carrying the revenue collected in the form of tax to the treasury in Kolkata. Therefore, such crucial circumstances had led Mahatma Satyanand to come up with the decision of expelling both the British and the Nawab from the Province for the welfare of the starving people by liberating the motherland.

Being satisfied from the arguments of Bhavanand in defence of robbery, and emancipation of the motherland, Mahendra starts thinking of becoming a part of the hermitage on a condition, "If I need not sacrifice, my wife and daughter, I may think of joining your order of children" (33). While having rest on the way to Padchihn from the hermitage with the thought of making arrangements for his wife, Kalyani and his daughter, Sukumari, Kalyani takes poison after the kid had taken unknowingly, and both of them fall unconscious. When helpless Mahendra was crying along with Swami Satyanand, they are arrested by the commotion of the British soldier who had come to suppress the looters of the treasure, keeping the dead on the roadside, and put them into the prison in Kolkata. Before turning unconscious Kalyani says to Mahendra in a mild, sweet and friendly voice:

"Look, it is the wish of gods. Who has the guts to disobey it? Once they have given me the permission to go, could I stay back? If I wouldn't have died, someone else would have killed me. The vow you have taken to serve the motherland, follow it with complete dedication. You will get the results of your good deeds and by virtue of your good deeds,

I will be able to go to heaven together we will be able to enjoy the unending happiness.”
(45)

These words of dying Kalyani keep echoing in Mahendra’s ears and strengthen his dedication and devotion to the motherland.

Though the thought of their families weakens the ascetics from inside, they attempt to regulate their senses as the need to their motherland. They attempt well to overcome the paradoxical state of being stuck between their familial responsibilities and their duty towards the motherland. Some of the instances of this include Mahendra, Jeevanand, and Shanti who take a vow to sacrifice their life for the sake of the motherland. To achieve this end, they undergo so many emotional psychological and physical tribulations. When Jeevanand visits his sister, Nimoi to leave Sukumari with her to take care of, Nimoi says, “Well done. You renunciated your wife, and started killing people, do you think, I am going to be scared, you may hit me, you may beat me, but I am not going to be scared” (56). His sister insists Jeevanand break the vow and live with his wife happily. By meeting his wife and falling weak emotionally, he has to do atonement but never shows his back from his ultimate pledge. Shanti also takes the vow to serve the motherland under the disguise of Naveenanand who follows the norms of the hermitage although with some exceptions. Once Satyanand and Mahendra are freed from the prison by the rebels, Satyanand conducts a vow for Mahendra and Naveenanand [Shanti]. Satyanand says, “Take a vow in front of God that you will not earn anything for yourself or for your family, whatever you will earn will donate to the treasury of the devotees of Vishnu” (80) to which both of them agree. Mahendra is sent to Padchihn to construct a fort to manufacture cannons, weapons, a cell with metal to keep the treasure of the ascetics and to make preparations for the battle.

The novelist also showcases that how the cruelties, disloyalties and irresponsibly hedonistic attitude of the Muslim ruler Mir Jafar towards the people of his province instil hatred in the hearts of Hindus towards the Muslims in general. Hence, results in the spread of communal sentiments largely and some humanitarian Muslims also become victims of such partial hatred. The rebels burn the houses of the Muslims wherever they find them, after freeing Mahendra and Satyanad from the prison. However, on seeing this, Satyanand says, “No need of unnecessary destruction, just go back” (64). Before the battle, villagers had started to come to the hermitage in hundred even thousand in numbers, and after having blessings from Bhavanand and Jeevanand, kill Muslim officials wherever they meet them. “Muslim villages were burnt to ashes. Local Muslim Nawab had sent many companies of soldiers to control and suppress these rebels” (92). Terrified of the communal sentiments of the Hindus, Muslims start disguising their identity, “Many Muslims shaved off their beards and applied ash on their bodies and started chanting the name of Lord Rama” (128).

After the many ups and down on the battlefield, the rebel ascetics turn victorious over the Muslim Ruler's soldiers and the English soldiers. Although the English commanders like Captain Thomas, Major Edward, Henry and Chatson had planned well, the presence of mind of the ascetics like Bhavanand, Shanti and timely arrival of Mahendra with seventeen cannons turned the crucial situation in their favour. The novelist writes:

In the middle of the hill, the British caught between the two groups of the children were getting pounded like the grain which gets grinded between the two grinding stones. After a short while, no British soldier was left alive. The entire land was filled with blood and the river of the blood started flowing down the hill. There was none to take this news to Warren Hasting. (146)

The above analysis shows that the repercussions of the dual exploitation of the people of Bengal during the famine of 1770 shook the foundation of the British in India. To create a soft corner in the hearts of the people of Bengal, Lord Clive of the East India Company handed over the administration to the Local Nawab and desired to rule the province through the Nawab while having the revenue powers with the Company. The British aimed at the extraction of the treasure of the Province whereas the local Nawab turned hedonistic and cruel. In both ways, the helpless people got exploited. Although the people loved their motherland before the implementation of the dual system of the government, after its implementation, a stratum of the society i.e. ascetics take a radical turn. The ascetics are not the begging saints rather all the victims of the dual system during the famine times which include family persons and saints equally. Expulsion of the oppressive rulers is the common glue that binds all the members of the hermitage. Mahatma Satyananda proves himself as the common thread which holds a variety of pearls in the form of divergent revolutionaries for the larger common sake. The love for the motherland gets increased with every increased degree of oppression. A common sense of self-sacrificing love for the motherland prevails everywhere. The ascetics live under stern vows until their mission is achieved. They sacrifice their familial relationships for the sake of their motherland.

The rebellion of the ascetics can be considered a pioneering attempt against the British ambitions of settling down their empire in India. The British might have taken a lesson from this rebellion regarding the implementation of their oppressive policies as inappropriate attempts for keeping the foundation of their empire and solidifying it. Therefore, changes in their policies in favour of the indigenous people in the form of reforms like the ban on the practice of Sati, permission to widow remarriage for the larger welfare of the society can be viewed as the results of the prior mentioned experiences to strengthen the empire in future without the possibility of any resistance.

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