

## An Analysis of *Anand Math* from Structuralist Perspective

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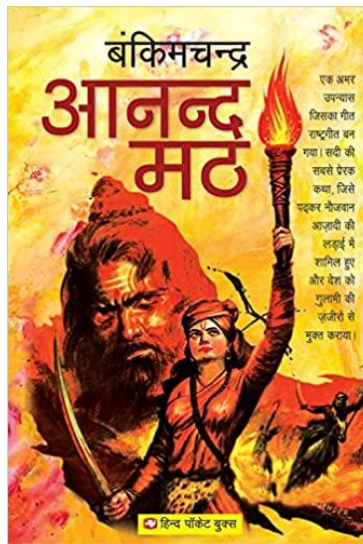
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### Abstract

Indian novelist, poet and journalist, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) is commonly known as *Sahitya Smrat* [Emperor of Literature] in Bengali literature. *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 aims at analyzing *Anand Math* from the structuralist perspective. It shows that how a text cannot be understood in isolation, rather it has to be seen in the larger context of structures. It also shows that how meanings are attributed to the things by the human mind as not contained within them. It aims at analyzing the network of inter-textual connections and the narrative structure as a complex of recurrent patterns. While going through the structures of language, it views the systematic structuring of the western culture.

**Keywords:** Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Anand Math*, structuralist perspective, narrative structure, inter-textual connections.

Structuralism has been applied to linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, folklore, mythology, and Biblical Studies - in fact to all social and cultural phenomena. Structuralism is considered scientific and objective. It identifies structures, systems of relationships, which endow signs (e.g. words) or items (e.g. clothes, cars, table manners, rituals) with identities and meanings, and shows us the ways we think (Guerin 368-369).

As an intellectual movement, structuralism had its inception in France in the work of the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss and the literary critic Roland Barthes. It believes that things cannot be understood in isolation; rather they have to be seen in the context of larger structures they are part of. It believes that meaning is an attribute of things as meanings are attributed to the things by the human mind. Meaning is always outside, not contained within the things. (Barry 38)

Though structuralism began in the 1950s and 1960s, its roots can be traced back to the thinking of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He concentrated on the patterns and functions of language in use today, with the emphasis on how meanings are maintained, established and the functions of grammatical structures. Firstly, he emphasized that all linguistic signs are arbitrary or the meaning we give to the words are completely arbitrary and these meanings are maintained by convention only. In this case, some onomatopoeic words like hiss can be exceptions. Secondly, he emphasized that the meaning of words is relational. No word can be defined in isolation from other words referring to the paradigmatic chain of words related in function and meaning. There are no intrinsic fixed meanings in language. Thirdly, he focuses on that language constitutes one's world. It does not just record or label it. Meaning is always given attributed to the object or idea by the human mind, and constructed by and expressed through language. It is not already contained within the thing. The choice between paired alternatives like terrorist or freedom fighter can be pondered over in this context (Barry 40-42).

Jonathan Culler and Scholes are credited for clarifying and simplifying the issues and practical possibilities of structuralism to the students of literature mediating European structuralism in Britain and the United States. Culler insists that literature:

can have no existence beyond a display of literary conventions that able reader to identify as the sign system that they already know and that is analogous to the way read sentences by recognizing phonetic, semantic and grammatical structures in them... Culler stresses that it is readers business to find contests that make a text intelligible and to reduce the "strangeness" or defamiliarization achieved by the text. Learning literary conventions

(the equal of Saussure's, langue) and resisting any inclination to grant the text any autonomy (to privilege the text) dispose the structuralist reader to search out and identify structures within the system of text and, if possible, expand poetics rather than to explicate the organic form of a privileged text. (Guerin 376)

Structuralism moves from the particular to the general placing the individual work within a wider structural context. For the structuralist, the culture we are part of can be read like a language, using these principles, since culture is made up of many structural networks which carry significance and can be shown to operate systematically. These networks operate through codes as a system of signs; they can make statements, just as language does, and they can be read or decoded by the structuralist or semiotician (Barry 45-46).

Marking high structuralism, Roland Barthes in his essay "Analysing Narrative Structures" identifies five codes common to all narratives: proairetic code, hermeneutic code, cultural code, semic code, symbolic code.

The proairetic code provides indications of actions. It governs our expectations of a narrative like if this has happened, this must happen next.

The hermeneutic code poses questions that provide narrative suspense. The cultural codes are those elements of common knowledge that we share as a community and therefore do not require a glossary.

The semic code like the cultural code draws upon a common set of stereotypes that are self-descriptive and self-evident like seeing a person in white clothes and a Gandhi cap, one instantly knows that he is a politician. The semic code is also known as the connotative code. It is linked to the theme generally.

The symbolic code is also linked to the theme but on a larger scale. It contains contrasts and binary polarities like male and female, night and day, and so on. For example, a shot of the moon and treetops or street in a horror film functions as a code (semic) for the night. When one becomes aware of the significance of the night based on the previous experiences of horror films that something evil is going to happen. So the semic code shifts where one understands that it is night from the sign of the moon to the symbolic code when one knows that something bad is about to happen. So day-night pair starts symbolizing good-bad (Nayar 24-25).



**Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894)**

Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bankim\\_Chandra\\_Chatterjee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bankim_Chandra_Chatterjee)

*Anand Math* got published in several languages including English after the Original publication in Bengali in 1882. The setting of the novel is in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal 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, who plays the key 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 poverty compelling people to loot anyone anywhere for survival reminding Charles Darwin's doctrine, i.e. survival of the fittest (Kumar 328). 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 vow 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 obligation towards the motherland they devote their lives.

As per the structuralist belief, *Anand Math* cannot be understood in isolation. One cannot understand the novel without putting it in a socio-political, especially historical context. In the opening of the novel, the novelist acquaints the readers with the famine of Bengal in the year 1770 (Chandra 72) while providing a detailed description. The novelist 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).

Tax here is associated with the dual system government in Bengal (1765-1772) that invited resistance from the native masses, especially from the farmers as the dual system of government 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).

The increased exploitation of the natives resulted from the victory of East India Company under the diplomatic leadership of Robert Clive over the Nawab of Bengal, Seraj-ud-Daulah in the battle of Plassey in 1757. The disloyal and deceitful demeanour 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, Robert Clive, the Governor of the Company started monopolizing the trade, and commerce in the Province as per terms of the company (Grover 51).

Without having the knowledge of the historical decisions of the rulers and their aftermaths on the masses one remains unable to connect with the text. It is only by locating the text in large contextual structures that enables one to understand the novel.

The next belief of the structuralists is regarding the formation of meanings of words. Structuralists believe that meaning is attributed to things by the human mind. Meaning is not contained within the things rather the meaning of words or the things is always outside. And the meaning of things varies from culture to culture. The words ‘mother’ (35), ‘children’ (30), ‘Anand Math’ (33), ‘Bande Mataram’ (36) and ‘sanyasi’ (34) are the terms that strengthen the willpower of the indigenous people for their nation. While leading Mahendra towards Anand Math, Bhavanand starts singing a song. After listening to the repetition of the word ‘mother’ like “Mother, I bow to thee! (27), “Mother, giver of ease”, “Mother I kiss thy feet” (28), Mahendra asks about the mother like who is she. Without giving any response, Bhavanand keeps singing without any break, and when after sensing Mahendra says that this is our country, not our mother, Bhavanand replies:

We do not consider any other mother. Mother and motherland are even superior to heaven “Our mother, the only motherland is our mother. We have no mother, no father, no brother, we have nothing, we don’t even have a wife, no house if at all we have anything that is only the sweet springs, sweet fruits, cool and mild breeze, green fields... (28)

Bhavanand again submerges himself in his song praising his motherland and when Mahendra asks about the word children, Bhavanand replies that the natives of Bengal are the children of the motherland. Mahendra asks, “Do children worship their mother through robbery and decoity? What kind of devotion is this towards mother?” (30). As Bhavanand had looted the cart with the rebels, he defends the act of robbery by arguing that this money belongs to the people of Bengal and either the king or the British have no right to loot the money of the indigenous people.

The children of Anand Math are known as the sanyasis who have renounced their pleasures for the liberation of their motherland. As a shrine, Anand Math has been projected as the central place that regulates the passions of the indigenous people and becomes synonymous with the emancipation of the motherland. The narrator describes Anand Math, a hermitage amidst the dense forest:

There is a huge hermitage built of stone. If archaeologists see this, they would say that this must have been the monastery of Buddhist Monks in earlier times, which now-a-days became the hermitage of Hindus. It is a two-storied building, in which there are many temples of Gods, and in the front area, there is a dance hall. The entire building is surrounded by a boundary wall. On the outside, the hermitage is shielded by huge trees in such a way that unless one goes very close, nobody can notice that such a huge hermitage is existing there. Being an old building the walls of the hermitage have broken at many places, but on a closer look one can make out that it has been built recently. It is difficult to imagine that human beings are living in this otherwise unapproachable and dense forest. In that building, in one of the rooms, a huge log was burning. (18)

The ascetics had chosen the location to mislead the perceptions of The British rulers and the Local Muslim Ruler. The ascetics were not the saints in the real terms who used to spend their life begging and renouncing the world for the higher mountains rather they were rebels who under the guise of saints had planned to root out the dual exploitation of the indigenous people of Bengal. So the rebellious Mahatma Satyanand preferred the actualization of his prospective vision through cultural signification as the ascetics prefer an isolated place for meditation and penance.



The selection of the location of the hermitage and setting as far away from the normal human settlements or villages spread an impression in the society that the place is made for the ascetics and their penance only. Under such a cultural impression the British and the Muslims pay no special attention from the revolt's perspective and Mahatma Satyanand finds enough time to strengthen by training the ascetics as fighters for the liberation of the motherland. The number of the ascetics who become ready to sacrifice their lives to throw away the oppressive rulers, increases to thousands and defeat the Muslim as well as the British army.

It is only due to the cultural signification that the rulers could not perceive through the ascetics' intentions. After the exposition of ascetics' real intentions, the persons in "orange robes" (47) stand for looters and are rebellious for the rulers. They become a symbol of danger for ruler power, and this is how the meaning is attributed to the words or things in a socio-cultural set up from outside by the human beings.

The words like mother, children, Anand Math and sanyasi do not carry the inherent meanings rather meaning is attributed to these words from outside and in this context Mahatma Satyanand, the Chief sanyasi plays a pivotal role in assigning the meaning to these words and propagating these among the indigenous masses.

As per the structuralist's belief, *Anand Math* uses inter-textual connections while making numerous references to Hindu mythology. Reference to "Jai Kaali" (15) after the robbers had looted Kalyani's jewellery, shouting the name of Goddess Kaali shows approval and wishing victory in their mission of overcoming their hunger by having the flesh of the gang leader as jewellery cannot drive away their hunger. The presence of Kalyani gives the robbers an idea of eating the flesh of the tender lady in place of the Skelton like a gang leader.

In the meantime, Kalyani manages to run away into the forest carrying her young daughter Sukumari and being exhausted she interrogates the existence of the God, "Where are you, whom I worshipped every day, whom I greeted every day with folded hands, the only one trusting upon whom I got into this forest, Hey Madhusudan, where are you?" (17). Kalyani expects help for her survival from her God in her adversity and thereafter, she is survived by Mahatma Satyanand (18).

The novelist shares his general perception of the world order regarding justice or injustice quoting the mythological entities "Leave alone human beings, sometimes gods also do unwise things like the moon is still seen on the sky even after sunrise, Indra, the god of rains, showers on the oceans also, Kuber- the god wealth keeps filling the chests of the wealthy people, Yamraj- the god of death snatches the life from that house only in which all the members have died already" (69).

While declaring the ascetics as the devotees of Vishnu, Mahatma Satyanand explains to Mahendra, “The natural characteristic of the religion of Vishnu is the destruction of evil and upliftment of the Mother Earth, because, Vishnu is the caretaker. To uplift the mother earth, ten times he took form and came onto the earth.” Mahatma Satyanand states that all the devotees of Vishnu, i.e., ascetics must root out the evil and oppression. When Mahatma Satyanand questions Shanti that she will not be able to follow the norms of the hermitage as her husband Jeevanand is also in the same hermitage, Shanti interrogates, “Who could be a hero without their wives, Can Lord Rama become a hero without Sita? Just count the number of wives Arjun had. How many wives did Bhim have, How many examples do I have to cite? Again is there any need to explain to you?” (85).

Citing examples from the Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, Shanti argues about the supportive role of females to their counterparts for the larger welfare of the society.

The novelist on the structuralist conventions presents the narrative structure as a complex of recurrent patterns. One comes across the indelible repeated motifs like the clashes of interests of the rulers and the masses or rebel ascetics, revengeful attitude of the ascetics towards the oppression of the rulers, and rulers plan to suppress the rebellious ascetics, all resulting from the implementation of the dual system of governance while giving no relaxation during the great famine and starvation in the narrative. The expression of the undying spirit and self-sacrificing love for the motherland on the part of ascetics keeps re-occurring through various characters. All the ascetics live under austere vows even renouncing their family responsibilities. The novelist showcases the helplessness of the people due to famine in Bengal:

For some people tried to survive through begging, but slowly even that became very difficult as there was nobody who could give food. They consumed whatever food grains were saved from the previous year. People started selling everything including cattle, land, property, after all, they even started selling their children and wives but who would buy? Everybody wanted to sell and nobody was willing to buy. When nothing was left, people started eating tea leaves, and some lower caste people tried to live by eating the flesh of rats and dogs, soon they started falling sick and died because of starvation and by eating otherwise inedible items. (10-11)

During such critical circumstances neither the British exempt the people from taxes nor the local Muslim king shows his concern for protecting the lives of people in Bengal (22) and as result, the whole text keeps echoing with the promises for the motherland like “Bande Mataram” (33), “Mother I bow to thee!” (30) and with the sacrificial expressions like Kalyani’s eating poison for keeping Mahendra’s vows for the motherland (42), vows of Jeevanad and Shanti under the disguise of Naveenanand, and Bhavanand’s commitment for liberating “Bharat Mata”



(35) the personified form of the motherland. Abject poverty, starvation, revenge, rebels, sacrifice, devotion to the motherland are the words that keep reverberating in the narrative to free the motherland from the oppressive rulers.

### To Conclude

The above analysis shows that *Anand Math* cannot be understood in isolation. It is only the context that provides an accurate understanding of the narrative. Meanings of the words like mother, children, sanyasi, Anand Math, Bande Mataram become synonymous with either the self-effacing love for the motherland or the depiction of the motherland as the most adorable and supreme entity for the indigenous people.

Generally, the sanyasis with orange robes are considered the ones who remain lost in their mediation and penance but their revelation as the rebels the British and the Muslim ruler starts identifying them with their cultural code, a threat to the rulers. Hence, the cultural artefacts and other Barthesian codes play a significant role in attributing and providing social validation to the meanings of words.

The narrative makes numerous references to Hindu mythology and establishes inter-textual connections. The recurring patterns of the narrative like famine, abject poverty, sacrificing tendency, adherence to the strict lifestyle, instances of devotion and dedication all strengthen the willpower of the ascetics and all contribute to the emancipation of the motherland. Moreover, the signification plays the most significant part in the narrative from the structuralists' perspective.

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