



REVISITING THE NATION: BANKIMCHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAY AND VANDE MATARAM IN THE LIGHT OF INDIAN NEO-NATIONALISM

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Vande Mataram, composed by Rishi Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, represents a unification of literature, political consciousness, and cultural significance of India's nationalist tradition. Emerging initially as an imaginative description within *Anandamath*, the song evolved into a revolutionary mantra that organized civil resistance against colonial supremacy. This paper places *Vande Mataram* within the theoretical framework of neo-nationalism, examining its historical origin, musical diffusion, revolutionary adoption, political debate, and constitutional acknowledgement. Using a qualitative historical-textual methodology, the study argues that *Vande Mataram* continues to function as a core symbol of Indian neo-nationalism—reaffirming cultural memory, civilizational continuity, and national dignity in post-colonial India. The paper evinces how the song excels its colonial origins to remain a living ideological force shaping contemporary national identity.

Keywords: *Neo-Nationalism; Cultural Nationalism; Indian Freedom Struggle; Civilizational Continuity; National Identity*

Introduction

'Vande Mataram', composed by Rishi Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, occupies an incomparable position in India's political and cultural history. Distinguished by its passion, lyrical euphony, vibrant and emotional impact, the song became a mantra of devotion to the motherland and a catalyst of collective consciousness during colonial rule. No other patriotic composition in India generated such extensive emotional, ideological, and environmental impact.

By the early twentieth century, *Vande Mataram* had transcended national boundaries, personifying India's struggle before an international audience. Madame Bikaji Rustam Cama's unfolding of the Indian flag bearing *Vande Mataram* at Stuttgart in 1907 and her publication of the *Vande Mataram* periodical in Geneva in 1909 illustrate its global political symbolism. Thinkers such as Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, and Rabindranath Tagore recognized the song as a vision of the motherland, a collective national appeal, and a song of praise to Mother Earth.

Theoretical Framing: Neo-Nationalism and Cultural Symbolism

Neo-nationalism derives from the contemporary reiteration of national identity grounded in historical memory, cultural continuity, and symbolic heritage rather than purely territorial or political sovereignty. Compare to the classical nationalism which primarily mobilized against colonial rule, neo-nationalism operates within post-colonial societies by revisiting foundational cultural symbols to reestablish unity, sovereignty, and collective purpose.

Within this framework, *Vande Mataram* functions as a civilizational signifier rather than merely a patriotic song. This song created history in the context of Indian Nationalism. Its invocation of the motherland as a sacred, nurturing entity aligns with cultural nationalism, where emotional attachment to land, language, and shared memory becomes central to national cohesion. Neo-nationalism reactivates such symbols to counter historical amnesia, ideological fragmentation, and post-colonial identity crises.

The imperishable relevance of *Vande Mataram* – from revolutionary chant to constitutional recognition and contemporary legal affirmation – demonstrates how cultural texts become ideological anchors in neo-nationalist discourse. The song's continued

appeal in public memory reflects a reclaiming of indigenous narratives within modern democratic India.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with *Vande Mataram* spans literary criticism, political history, musicology, and nationalist studies. Researchers such as Yogindranath Sarkar, Lalit Chandra Mitra, Sachish Chandra Chatterjee, and Jagadish Bhattacharya document its composition, publication history, and early performances. Utpal Chakraborty contextualizes Bankim Chandra's work within his socio-political environment, while Ramesh Chandra Majumdar identifies *Vande Mataram* as the defining war cry or motto of the freedom struggle.

Political debates surrounding the song—especially during the 1930s communal controversies—have been examined as moments where cultural nationalism intersected with identity politics. Constitutional discussions and post-independence governmental statements further demonstrate the song's evolving symbolic status and contemporary relevance in the Indian nation-state.

Methodology

The study applies a qualitative approach and historical analysis as methodology, strictly based on the attached primary text and its cited sources. The research method includes:

- Sequential reconstruction of the song's origin, dissemination, and political engagement
- Analysis of literary, musical, and political narratives.
- Interpretative framing on the basis of neo-nationalist theory.
- Examination of constitutional debates and post-independence recognition and occurrences.

Literary Genesis and National Consciousness

The song *Vande Mataram* was first published in the novel *Anandamath*, where it was sung by the children of the monastery as an anthem of patriotism. The phrase literally means "I salute the mother," where the mother signifies the motherland our Bangajanani or the mother of India. *Anandamath* was serialized in *Bangadarshan Patrika* between 1287 and 1289 B.E. and later published as a book in 1882.

However, *Vande Mataram* was composed earlier, in October 1874, following Durga Puja at Bankim Chandra's ancestral home in Kanthalpara, Naihati. Inspired by devotional music sung by Balhari Das, Bankim Chandra was emotionally stimulated toward the idea of the motherland. Memoirs by Purna Chandra Chattopadhyay confirm that the song existed before *Anandamath* and that Bankim foresaw its future impact on Bengal and as well as the whole India.

Musical Transmission and Public Mobilization: The first musical composition of *Vande Mataram* is attributed to Jadunath Bhattacharya (Jadubhatta). Subsequent compositions were created by Gopal Chandra Dhar and Kshetranath Mukhopadhyay. The song was first performed theatrically on 24 March 1883 at the National Theatre, under the direction of Devkantha Bagchi. Rabindranath Tagore sang *Vande Mataram* publicly in 1884 and later composed its tune, performing it at the Indian National Congress sessions of 1890 and 1896.

Following Bankim Chandra's death in 1894, numerous musicians continued to reinterpret and record the song, expanding its reach across India.

Revolutionary Usage and Anti-Colonial Resistance: It was found that during our freedom struggle, *Vande Mataram* became inseparable from sacrifice and resistance. Revolutionary youths marched, protested, and faced execution chanting the song. In fact, this song was holding the true tune of Indian National Movement. It echoed through the anti-Partition of Bengal movement, Swadeshi agitation, Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India movements. Revolutionaries embraced it as a mantra, even at the gallows, reinforcing its status as a symbol of moral courage and national resolve. Historian Ramesh Chandra Majumdar emphasized that chanting *Vande Mataram* accompanied both resistance and martyrdom. Organizations such as the *Vande Mataram Sampradaya* were formed to raise funds through patriotic songs, with leaders like Surendranath Banerjee, Rabindranath Tagore, and Chittaranjan Das guiding the movement.

Beyond institutional debates, *Vande Mataram* derived its enormous power from its role in revolutionary and popular resistance to colonial rule. British authorities viewed the song as dangerous enough to warrant bans and repression, recognising its capacity to mobilise mass sentiment against imperial authority. It functioned as a slogan, a chant, and a moral force that infused the freedom struggle with emotional intensity.

Revolutionaries across ideological and religious lines embraced *Vande Mataram* as a cry of defiance. Figures such as Khudiram Bose, Ashfaqulla Khan, Ram Prasad Bismil, and others reportedly invoked the song even in the face of execution, underscoring its resonance as a symbol of sacrifice and courage. Its repeated use in protests, political meetings, and underground movements transformed it into a living expression of anti-colonial resistance rather than merely a literary composition.

Importantly, literary analysis suggests that Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay himself may have conceived the poem in stages, with the first two stanzas originally written earlier and lacking the explicitly idolatrous imagery found in later sections. This lends historical depth to the argument that the core of *Vande Mataram* functioned primarily as a metaphor for the motherland rather than a religious invocation.

Thus, the song's revolutionary legacy rests not in theological interpretation but in its capacity to articulate a shared sense of humiliation under colonialism and a collective aspiration for freedom. This legacy explains why *Vande Mataram* continues to evoke intense emotion and why debates around it persist long after the political circumstances of its creation have passed.

Contestation, Communal Politics, and Compromise: *Vande Mataram* faced opposition due to communal politics from the 1930s. Following Ramsay MacDonald's policies, sections of the Muslim League objected to the song, citing its perceived religious symbolism. Burnings of *Anandamath* occurred, and debates intensified within the Congress.

In 1937, after consultations involving Rabindranath Tagore, Subhas Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Ramanand Chattopadhyay, it was resolved that only the first two stanzas of *Vande Mataram* would be sung at official functions. Despite this compromise, opposition persisted, and Jinnah's eleven demands in 1938 included abandoning the song.

From its early circulation within the nationalist movement, *Vande Mataram* emerged not only as a symbol of resistance but also as a site of ideological contestation. While the song gained immense popularity during the Swadeshi movement and was embraced as a unifying nationalist anthem, opposition gradually crystallised – particularly from sections of the Muslim community – around its later stanzas that invoked the nation as a goddess using explicitly Hindu imagery.

By the 1920s and 1930s, Muslim journals and political organisations increasingly framed the song as promoting idolatry and as being incompatible with Islamic religious principles. This opposition intensified after the 1937 provincial elections, when the Muslim League, seeking to consolidate a political support base, foregrounded objections to the song as part of broader communal mobilisation. The League passed resolutions describing *Vande Mataram* as subversive of genuine nationalism and accused the Congress of attempting to impose it upon Muslims.

Within the Congress itself, leaders acknowledged both the emotional power of the song and the political risks it posed. Jawaharlal Nehru characterised much of the opposition as “manufactured by communalists,” yet recognised the need to address genuine grievances. Rabindranath Tagore's intervention proved decisive: he conceded that the full poem, when read in context, could wound Muslim sentiments, but argued that the first two stanzas which were already widely sung, had acquired an independent national character. This reasoning informed the Congress Working Committee's unanimous resolution in 1937 to adopt only the first two stanzas as the national song.

The decision represented a conscious political compromise, aimed at preserving unity within a diverse society while retaining the symbolic core of the nationalist tradition. The compromise did not fully satisfy either side. Communal hardliners rejected the song completely, while strong nationalist supporters were unhappy because they felt the song had been shortened due to political pressure. Thus, *Vande Mataram* became emblematic of the tensions inherent in forging a pluralistic nationalism under colonial rule.

Constitutional Recognition and Neo-Nationalist Continuity: Post-independence debates culminated in the Constituent Assembly's 1950 declaration granting *Vande Mataram* equal honour with *Jana Gana Mana*. This constitutional recognition institutionalized the song's symbolic authority. Contemporary legal affirmations, including the 2022 Union Home Ministry affidavit, demonstrate the neo-nationalist reaffirmation of *Vande Mataram* as a living national symbol.

At the moment of constitutional consolidation after Independence, *Vande Mataram* occupied a distinctive yet carefully delimited position. When debates over national symbols arose in the Constituent Assembly, the leadership chose *Jana Gana Mana* as the national anthem while affirming that *Vande Mataram* – in its historically accepted form – would enjoy equal honour as the national song. President Rajendra Prasad's statement reflected a deliberate avoidance of a formal resolution, signalling consensus rather than confrontation.

This is to be noted here that the Constitution itself made no explicit reference to either the national anthem or the national song. Legal differentiation later emerged through statutory frameworks such as the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971, which criminalised disrespect to the national anthem but did not extend similar penalties to the national song. Judicial interpretations, including Supreme Court rulings, upheld individual freedom of conscience and expression, reinforcing the voluntary, non-coercive status of *Vande Mataram*.

In the post-Independence period, the song periodically reappeared in political and legal controversies—particularly in relation to compulsory singing in schools and public institutions. In recent years, neo-nationalist discourse has sought to reinterpret these historical compromises as acts of appeasement and betrayal. Calls to introduce a new fundamental duty under Article 51A to accord *Vande Mataram* the same respect as the national anthem reflects an attempt to re-embed the song within a more assertive nationalist framework.

The new government guidelines for the National Song, “Vande Mataram” have been issued (The fresh set of guidelines were uploaded on The Union Home Ministry website on February 6 but no formal announcement or a statement was issued; The Hindu, February 12, 2026). Order of Songs: *Vande Mataram* should be sung or played before the National Anthem when both are performed at an event. Audience Conduct: The audience must stand at attention when the official, approximately 3 minute 10 second version, is sung or played. Exceptions: Standing is not required if the song is played as part of a newsreel or documentary. Occasions for Use: The song is to be used at formal state functions for the arrival and departure of the President and Governors, and it is also suggested that school days may begin with the community singing of the song.

This continuity is less constitutional than ideological: while the formal legal status of *Vande Mataram* remains unchanged, its symbolic invocation serves contemporary political narratives that seek to reinterpret the past in the light of present ideological commitments.

Conclusion

Considering the neo-nationalism aspects, *Vande Mataram* emerges not merely as a historical manifestation but as an enduring ideological force. Its journey – from literary creation to revolutionary chant, contested symbol, and constitutionally honoured national song which reflects India’s continuous upbringing of its cultural identity. As India commemorates the 150th anniversary of *Vande Mataram*, safeguarding its dignity becomes a reaffirmation of the nation’s civilizational memory, democratic unity, and historical consciousness.

The song that brought us this freedom in return for the sacrifice and self-sacrifice of numberless brave revolutionaries. The pledge or commitment that every Indian citizen must take in the 79th year of independence is to protect the dignity of the country's independence and also to protect the dignity and honour of the national anthem.

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