



The Political Theology of Nationalism: Exploring the Intersectionality between Nation, Caste and Gender in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath*

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Abstract

Hindu intelligentsia makes a secret use of the inimical relations between Muslims, Scheduled castes, Scheduled tribes and Adivasis, which has grown even worse, recently. This lends ammunition to the ulterior forces of intelligentsia, in order to extract desirable actions from them. The fact that the maximum atrocities have happened to these communities, has made them adopt a politics of vengeance and retaliation. Instead of uncovering their atrocities and bringing them out before the entire world, they prefer to keep grievances to themselves and retaliate in their own ways. The retaliatory politics worsen the inimical ties and this makes the radical Hindu forces even more actively installed. At the same time, Muslims and Christians show least interest in resisting casteist forces, which they believe is a matter of religion and they should not be meddling with, accounts for the resentment of Dalit-Bahujans against them. I speculate, phenomenon of Hindutva has a historical impetus to it and it is a result of painstaking work of many years. This paper makes use of Bankim's *Anandamath* to illustrate the emergence of Hindutva forces and the ease with which they fitted in Indian nationalist discourse. *Anandamath* has no explicit political agenda but it implicitly tries to construct a new moral universe for its readers. It endows the readers with a new moral imperative and totally different sense of purpose. The novel, has messianic overtones, as it tries to give the impression as if it is a preparation for a war, a historical war which could transform the destiny of Indian nation. The emergence of the novel added fuel to the already swelling tide of nationalism.

Keywords

Hindutva, theology, nationalism, gender, caste

Introduction

Modernity is conventionally understood as being up to date with technology and developments in an age; very seldom is it seen as an attitude in itself. To be modern thus, is not about being trendy or dandy but to be able to envisage the world in relation to its contemporary reality. Nowadays, growing intolerance towards other religion and culture is something which cannot be taken as a blueprint for modernity. This resistance to accept the 'other' is an attitude which denies being at par with true meaning of modernity. By 1920's, a certain kind of ambivalence developed about religion and a homogeneous and universal culture became the demand of the entire world. The debate between the self and other continues till date and it is in such ambivalent times, nationalism came to recuperate humanity, as an inclusive project. Nationalism as a phenomenon is one of the consequential and subsequent germinations of a modern concept like 'Nation'. Though, nationalism is considered by sociologists as a germination of modern times, its fundamental edifice of operation is largely orthodox, extreme rightist and suavely traditional. That is, to transform nationalism into some kind of theology so that it gathers same attention, respect and popularity which religion enjoys amongst the masses.

In India, in the political formation of nationalism, one religion plays essentially significant role, that is Hinduism. Hinduism, initially an umbrella term to envisage various other religions and communities, has now become coterminous with one community and religion: Hindu(ism). With no identifiable founder, more than thousand million adherents and many divine manifestations, the religion seems to reflect multiple worldviews. Though it ascribes to multiple worldviews, the essential pre-requisite to be a Hindu is singular, which is to accept authority of scriptures and to believe in caste system as divinely sanctioned. Caste system is, indeed, one of the intrinsic features of Hinduism. Amidst such unrest, when disagreements began to arise along the lines of religion and caste, a new kind of framework is required to hold people together. *Vande Mataram*, which is an important aspect of *Anandamath*, is an example of one such disagreement. Muslims opposed the compulsory recitation of the song in schools and *Madrassa* (Muslim school), as it is tantamount to idolatry and against the religious fundamentals of Islam. The defence of traditional Hindus is, if Muslims are to prove their presence in the nationalist project, they have to recite this song. This strategy could be seen as another move to dislocate Muslims from the national mainstream. Nationalism, then, came to recuperate the project of nation building from this religious dilemma. The strength of nationalism lies in its ability to lure people from all sects and ensuring them freedom they desire for. It neither dissatisfies political leaders, upholders of religion, fundamentalist nor the democrats or intellectuals. Critics argue that even nationalism is not spared from the ideological scanner of nationalist entrepreneurs. As a political project for social cohesion, it has gone completely awry in India. A unique accoutrement is designed, taking religion and politics as a potent alloy to stream nationalism and eventually take recourse in it.

Nationalism as a State Sponsored Militarism

Eric Hobsbawm avers, "Historians are to nationalism what poppy growers [...] are to heroin addicts! We supply the essential raw material for the market"! These lines carefully impart that nationalism is the demand of these times, without which it would be

difficult to keep peace. The analogy between heroin addicts and nationalism is apt, as it carefully depicts our dependence on nationalism. Tagore calls it, 'Fetish of nationalism' as nobody is free practically and freedom is just a false consciousness offered by Nation. He says that people sacrifice their freedom regularly to this "fetish of nationalism" (*The illegitimacy of Nationalism* 6).

The idea of modern nation-state gained prominence in India primarily during the latter half of nineteenth century. As India has no unique set of its own nationalist ideas and it is basically aping a western concept of nationalism; Indian society considered itself backward for not having nationalistic sentiments. Many of the leading political thinkers and integration-nationalists like Bhudev Mukhopadhyaya consider this to be a 'fatal-flaw' in Indian civilization. Thus, to learn as much as they can from the British, a certain section of population is devoted to extract maximum benefit from the British rule. In the colonial Bengal, it is the Bengali upper-class elite who are responsible for the collaboration between the Indians and the British. They wanted to learn the techniques which British employed as a part of their strategy to rule India and wanted to replace them the moment they seemed fit for doing so. Thus, this collaboration, with a difference, is necessary for the Bengali '*bhadralok*' to create a faithful space for themselves amongst the British administration.

The highly confidential task of nation building is carried out with active compliance of state, sociologists and historians. G. Aloysius in *Nationalism without a Nation in India* talks about, maltreatment of history by historians merely to serve their own ends. That, for a long period of time, study of nationalism has been something which is exclusively kept for historians to venture. In its social manifestations, nationalism has taken shape in the form of disputes primarily between Hindus and Muslims and various others issues. In these manifestations, nationalism came to be understood as totally different from what it is in reality. Therefore, both with the intervention of historians and social performative manifestations of nationalism, it got more and more exclusive and circumvented to serving narrow interests of select few. Thus, nationalism in India arose as a response to colonialism and other parochial differential structures existing in society. Tagore is particularly influenced by Gandhi's view of Indian nationalism, as he labels it 'intense internationalism': "Violent nationalism, otherwise known as imperialism, is the curse. Non-violent nationalism is a necessary condition of corporate and civilized life" (Nandy 8).

It is argued by sociologists that nationalism is supposed to give birth to a one unified nation but it ended up becoming the source for originating various small communities, distinguishable on the basis of language, religion or caste. Nationalism, as a pan-national ideology, stemmed from collective outburst of people against the colonial tendencies but it later lost its lure to enamour people and keep them bind. Thus, in order to sustain that collective force several new nationalities emerged which were relegated to margins. These nationalities had their own interests, considerably different from other communities and this led to a conflict between them, which is popularly called communal violence.

Paul Lawrence explicates, "The liberal political nationalism of the nineteenth century was soon co-opted by the right into exclusionist, aggressive, 'integral' forms of

nationalism. There have also been anti-colonial, separatist and peripheral forms of political nationalism” (5). *Anandamath* offers one of the earlier instances of such a militarism and aggression. It is a world of warrior monks and virgin warriors who are no other than the wives of these monks. Banerjee opines,

[...] militarism has not necessarily been an exclusively masculine trait in India. Goddesses such as Kali and Durga illustrate that violence and militarism have also been associated with the divine figure of the feminine. The cult of the mother goddess as a symbol of martial strength and prowess even inspired some nineteenth-century nationalist movements. Indeed, the existence of multiple ways of mapping gender and militarism in India has, to a certain extent, enabled female visibility in the Hindu nationalist project. (Banerjee 14)

A great deal of politics influences the thinking, says Partha Chatterji, of mass politics in India; that the ‘nationalistic discourse’ exercises immense autonomy over the thought processes. He ruminates on the limits and failures of the nationalist thought as well as the contradictions and breaks in the nationalist ideology. To claim autonomy over the nationalist thinking itself, should be of utmost importance as it is still ticketed by western academic intelligentsia. He states that nationalism is never taken seriously in India and it is thus important to rekindle its intellectual potential.

The Religious Hegemony of Hinduism

Kancha Ilaiah (1996) opines, there is no essential similarity between Hindus and Dalits as a community with its own signifiatory practices and alliances with natural forms of worship. Since all religions foundationally are cultural and not natural, Dalit culture shares almost nothing with Hinduism. It is a culture with its independent gods and goddesses which has been shepherded by the priestly caste, the Brahmins. He espouses the view that Hinduism and Brahminism serves as a potent alloy in the suppression of more inferior cultures like that of Dalits. Dalits are not even fully aware of Hindu gods and goddesses and they have not been allowed for ages to enter Hindu temples, they cannot possibly identify with Hinduism which is as alien to them as Hindu sacred texts. In this regard Ilaiah writes, “[...] never heard the word ‘Hindu’- not as a word, nor as the name of a culture, nor as the name of a religion in our early childhood days” (9).

In contrast to Brahmins, a potentially radical and democratic view of Dalit culture is created, which incorporates: An equal division of labour between men and women, specializations in work are not gender specific, smoking and drinking are not exclusive to males, no *purdah* or *zenana* system for women, roles of male and female are arbitrary, life is one time affair so emphasis on enjoying it rather than practicing abstinence and no commitments of being a vegetarian. In addition, Dalits have no concept of heaven or hell, no concept of a temple where one can visit god, no fixed grammar thus no religious texts and no purity and pollution concept. On the contrary, Brahmins are portrayed as orthodox, irrational, anti-progressive, anti-democratic, intolerant to women freedom and thus in favour of sustenance of *zenana* (*purdah*) and absolutely against women crossing the threshold of the house to work.

In Dalit culture, production becomes the focal point of each and everything and marital sex is no exception to this idea. Unlike Brahmins, sex for them is not a leisure activity but to fornicate and multiply. They go to fields to work early morning unlike Brahmins whose primary task is to bathe and pray. This attribution of inferior, corporeal and manual labour to Dalits led Brahmins to hijack the task of maintenance of temples, service to god and spiritual labour (if it is a labour at all). Entire economic and social set up would crumble, if Dalits unanimously decide not to work. With Ambani, Tata's and other trading classes controlling the entire economy of India, the contribution of Dalits in making the society function is made to appear almost negligible.

Disappearance of Dalits from National Mainstream

In India, struggle for independence eventually got reduced to a struggle primarily of right wing, upper class orthodox Brahmins.¹ Even Shanti and Jibananda, primal characters in *Anandamath* are Brahmins and all other major protagonists are upper class/caste Hindus. Lipner opines, "There is no place for Muslims among the band of Children of the Mother" (13). The common question that could be posed is, if nation is approximated to a common mother to all, then how she could have children of different origins. Or for that matter, a mother doesn't differentiate amongst her own children. The pedestalization of women is a selective and conscious attempt to endorse a particular ideology. It is used to bring women out of private sphere to contribute in consolidation of nationalist agendas in significant ways. According to Sikata Banerjee, "[...] The term 'Motherhood' has vast dimensions, it extends beyond the family to town, society, country, nation, and the entire universe. Hence, the personality of a woman is all pervading" (119). "It is a role selectively designed for women to take active participation in nation building. The corporeal representation of nation as 'Mother India' or 'Bharat Mata' is to use their bodies as a political weapon and ensure their uncompromised commitment to nation building" (Choudhary 75). It is to, "[...] draw women out of their homes in limited ways, to participate in riots and demonstrations and then push them back into their designated spaces and roles" (qtd. in S. Banerjee 113).

In a similar vein, Dalits are not considered ideally appropriate to be a part of this project. It becomes absolutely essential to see through larger network of power operating at and through such dichotomies which should be jettisoned at any cost. To acknowledge the autonomous existence of Dalit culture, to register their presence as a culture or a religion which has the right to exist separately from Hinduism is of crucial import. With absolutely no narratives dealing with Dalit culture in its entirety, Brahminical forces try to erase the genuine actual history of Dalits from India. This statement gets substantiated when Ilaiah (1996) says "Brahmin writers did not mention the name of Dalit gods- they did not find them worth mentioning [...] even the contents of Dalit's lives was not fit as a subject for the Hindu writers turned communists, atheists or a rationalist [...] Even the language in which these people refer to is Sanskritized" (13).

¹ Partha Chatterji, in his *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial world* explicates the bureaucratic nature of the initial impetus of nationalism in India. He talks about Gandhi's circumvention of the project of nationalism and making it an elite project.

Ilaiah (1996) clarifies, “[...] both the Bible and the Quran pronounced in favor of the permanent inequality of women and men. However, they never approved caste and color differences and inequalities, indeed they preached against them. In that sense, the Bible and Quran are patriarchal but not racist and casteist” (Ilaiah 15). These religions try their best to establish unity and harmony amongst fellow practitioners and adherents. Hinduism, on the contrary is bifurcated at different angles that its junctions are filled with differences of various spectrums. One of the reasons for the rampant success of Islam is its upholding of the idea of unity and brotherhood amongst each other. In his seminal text *Gora*, Tagore observes, “that amongst the Mohemmedans there was something which enabled them to unite with one another [...] in any calamity, Mohemmedans stood shoulder to shoulder in a way that the Hindus never did [...] that the Mussalmans were united by their religion and not merely by custom and tradition [...] the bond of religion made them intimately one” (573).

The above quoted line draws attention to the inability of Hinduism to anchor people on a level of spiritual unity: “Spiritual unity is the anchor around which the other forms of unity are synthesized. India as a nation lost that scope because of Brahminism, which is at the core of Hinduism” (*Buffalo Nationalism* 17). Hinduism extensively relied on the use of scriptures to suppress those inferior to them. Such endorsements are given the impression of being fixed and eternal.² It is, “a sweeping denial of the place of change in human life, purchased at the cost of untold misery for so many who were robbed of their chance to rise in society and realize their full potential, can only be called spiritual fascism” (18). Hinduism carries the legacy of its orthodox and monolithic practices almost to the extent of triviality. The appropriation of Other Backward classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to oppress one of their own kinds also has an ulterior motif. The Hindu communists today teach their children in English schools, the others are told to learn regional languages. They are afraid that language might give them a sense of being educated and would strip them of their inferiority of menial status. Such disguised oppression is far more dangerous, as it has the capacity to inflict deeper wounds. It has the potential to leave an entire generation of a Dalit intellectually handicapped and crippled.

Hinduism and its silent endorsement of Violence

The mechanisms to demonstrate and inculcate fear are made available by religious sanctions. The symbol of swastika, once symbol of Nazis, is now a common cultural symbol amongst Hindu households. Ilaiah (2004) opines weapons like Trishul (trident) and Chakra (disc) and various other weapons, which are mostly used by gods to kill Chandals or Dalits, now adopted by right-wing Hindu extremists to inculcate fear. The argument is that Hinduism essentializes violence, which is visible in its use of weapons. There is a conscious attempt to keep the masses away from books and education. The religion in Hinduism becomes the private sphere of Priests and they are more interested in maintaining their power rather than educating the masses. Also, the majority of OBCs

² J.S Mill’s famous line in his essay *Subjection of Women* that which is customary appears natural and the natural appears customary seems equally relevant here.

who are deliberately kept away from pursuing studies serve as physical ammunition for the Hindutva forces. OBC today remains one of those social categorizations which constitutes majority of people from various backgrounds, as compared to any other social stratification. It has highest number of unemployed people who are utilized in various ways for various purposes.

The practice of celebrating wars and violence in Hindus' epics and scriptures are accounts of gods and goddesses killing enemies.³ Violence becomes something to be taken pride in and not despised as long as it is used to destroy the enemies. Ilaiah (2004) states, "Islam neither projected violence nor self-sacrifice as the core value of the spiritual life. Both in relation to war and self-sacrifice it made itself contextual. Neither in its discourse nor practice has Hinduism made violence contextual; instead it essentializes it" (23). Thus, in essence every symbol associated with Hinduism is hallmark of violence and destruction. These indicate their bent towards spiritual fascism and occupation of violence in their spiritual faith system. The inequality between castes has seeped down into the system and is preserved by upper classes just so that their privileges are not compromised. This state of war and organized violence has been maintained by the ruling upper class.

In a similar vein, in the image of a warrior monk or militant *sannyasi*, Bankim visualizes a different conception of masculinity and a different image of a warrior. It is best described by Lipner, "[T]here was a rosary of wooden beads (*rudrakser mala*) around his neck, he wore earrings, his long black hair was bound in a turban (pheta), and his long beard fell upon his chest. He was five foot ten inches in height. A sword hung continually from his waist" (qtd. in Lipner 31). These monks are expert in physical domains, martial arts and are aware of technicalities of using sword and other weapons. Thus, an acute amalgamation of religion, physical prowess and talents is prepared to deal with ambiguities in national building. There is nonetheless a hegemonic hold of Brahmins over the nationalist scenario. Their animosities are not especially reserved for Dalits but are equally present for Muslims. Expressing his anger towards Muslim rule, there comes a point in the novel, Bhabananda says:

Where else is in such a mess? Where else do people have to eat grass for lack of food? Or thorns, or anthills, or creepers from the forest? [...] Everywhere else there's a pact with the king for protection, but does our Muslim king protect us? We've lost our religious way of life, our caste status, our self-respect, our family connections- and now we're about to lose our lives! If we don't get rid of these bearded degenerates will anything be left of our Hindu identity? (Lipner I, ch.10)

The internal disunity and ruptures within the Hinduism itself makes it a problematic force today. The fundamental question raised here is that, "How can a religious book construct a vast majority of people as social slaves?" (*Buffalo Nationalism* 8). Religion continually invades the sphere of politics, to make itself more prominent. These ruptures or discontinuities give it an appearance of decay and essential morbidity. A more creative

³ The famous portrait of goddess kali with a trident in her hand and a black man underneath her feet, at whom the weapon is directed.

examination of the spiritual scriptures is required, to dismantle the boundary between essentialism and existentialism, with an innovative approach to transcend the initial barriers following the liberation of Dalits.⁴

It is important to reconsider certain religious practices and impositions, and take one step ahead to create a society which is more accommodative, accepting and tolerant of each other's differences. It is practically impossible and fearsome to impose one single agenda on the entire nation which differs along various lines. The imposed homogeneity would have its own repercussions and ramifications in the long period of time. In India, it is not merely a clash of civilizations, but also clash of religion, interests, caste, class and gender. The only active solution could be the fair acknowledgement of each other's differences and respecting them. To co-exist with differences, without any negative appraisal for other culture or civilization is the need of the hour. Religion would continue to share its political coordinates with nationalism and politics surrounding it, as long as its purpose is served. The only thing which could usher its demise is the necessity of taking these concepts seriously to invoke another political revolution.

⁴ In earlier times, whenever a person hailing from lower-caste passes by, s/he needs to announce his or her arrival to the people nearby, so as not to pollute the passerby. With the emergence of modern times, this feature is eventually lost as the Brahmins soon started to use bicycles, motor cars and so on. Thus, a subsequent change followed in various cultural practices with the passage of time. Therefore, it is crucial, to similarly re-examine those sections in Gita which have condemned Dalits to lifelong slavery of upper castes.

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