

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone,

This lesson is a continuation of our previous discussions on the the symbols used in the anti-colonial movement. Today, we turn our attention to the iconic song “Vande Mataram”, a powerful cultural symbol that galvanized nationalist sentiment during the freedom struggle. More than just a patriotic anthem, Vande Mataram invoked the image of the nation as a divine and nurturing mother, effectively intertwining spirituality, emotional belonging, and political resistance. We will explore how this image of Mother India became central to constructing a collective national identity and fostering unity across linguistic, regional, and religious divides.

“Vande Mataram” is the national song of India. It holds deep cultural and historical significance and is often used to express patriotism and love for the country. The song’s title, “Vande Mataram,” translates to “I bow to thee, Mother” and symbolizes reverence for the motherland. It has played a crucial role in India's struggle for independence and continues to inspire patriotic feelings. In this lecture, we will explore how the song "Vande Mataram" transcended religious and caste boundaries to foster political unity among the people. We'll take a closer look at the controversies surrounding this song and how it evolved to represent a more secular image of a mother, despite its strong religious roots. The song "Vande Mataram" was created by the famous Bengali writer, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay in his famous novel “Ānandamath.” The novel is set against the backdrop of the Sannyasi Rebellion that took place in the late 18th century in northern Bengal. The Sannyasis were ascetic monks who led a revolt against the British colonial rule. In the novel, the song is sung by these monks as an expression of their love for the motherland and their determination to fight for its freedom.

In the first part of the song, it portrays the mother as someone who represents the beauty of nature. But in the third part, it changes things up a bit. It presents the mother as more than just a natural figure; she's like a divine idol. She embodies knowledge, righteousness (dharma), and is the very life and soul within us. People even worship her in temples, and she combines the qualities of goddesses like Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati. So, in simple terms, she's not just a mother but a divine and revered presence. You will be surprised to note that the song "Vande Mataram" was not originally about Bharat Mata or the Mother of India. When Bankimchandra wrote it, the idea of Bharat Mata hadn't even come into existence. Then who is the mother referred to in the song Vande Mataram. Well, the sonf "Vande Mataram,” with its personification of the motherland as the "mother goddess,” originally referred to Bengal. In this context, the mother who the prayers are offered is Banga Mata, or Mother Bengal. This regional connection of the song with Bengal was so strong that Aurobindo Ghose referred to “Vande Mataram” as the "national anthem of Bengal.” In short, the song’s primary focus was on the love and devotion to Bengal as the motherland.

It was only about twenty years later that the song Vande Mataram came to signify Bharat

Mata or the Mother India. As the song "Vande Mataram" gained immense popularity in Bengal during the Swadeshi movement. In 1896, it was turned into music by Rabindranath Tagore and he sang the song at a Congress session in Calcutta. This song became really popular during the Swadeshi movement in Bengal in the early 1900s, and it was used as a sort of mantra by revolutionary groups in Bengal. There was even an English newspaper called "Bande Mataram," which supported this movement. Later on during the anti-Partition movement in 1905, its influence began to spread to other parts of India. Thus, a song penned more than two decades earlier became a rallying point for unity among people who saw this division as unjust. In 1906, during the annual Congress session held in Calcutta, delegates from all across the country experienced the electrifying impact of the song and its slogan on the assembled crowds. Inspired by the impact this song had upon the people, Bal Gangadhar Tilak returned to Maharashtra and popularized "Vande Mataram" as a nationalist declaration. Notably, the famous poet Subramania Bharathi later translated the song into Tamil, making it immensely popular in the southern regions of India. As the idea of Bharat Mata, or Mother India, gained prominence in the second decade of the twentieth century, the mother in "Vande Mataram" became synonymous with India as a whole.

But there's more to this story. In the 1920s, when the song "Vande Mataram" became a regular feature at public meetings organized by the Congress in Bengal, it sparked objections from Muslims. The controversy didn't stop at the regional level; it soon reached the national stage. Muslim members of the Congress objected to the song's use in Congress meetings. This dispute escalated to such an extent that in 1937, a committee was formed with prominent figures like Nehru, Subhas Bose, Abul Kalam Azad, and Narendra Dev to address the matter. To resolve the matter, they sought the advice of Tagore. Tagore suggested that while the later verses of the song might be problematic for those who followed a strictly monotheistic religion, the first verse could be sung by everyone. In a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru in October 1937, Tagore wrote specifically about the first part of the song: He says

“I found no difficulty in separating it from the rest of the poem and from those portions of the book of which it is a part, with all the sentiments of which, brought up as I was in the monotheistic ideals of my father, I could have no sympathy . . . I freely concede that the whole of Bankim's 'Vande Mataram' poem, read together with its context, is liable to be interpreted in ways that might wound Moslem susceptibilities, but a national song, though derived from it, which has spontaneously come to consist only of the first two stanzas of the original poem, need not remind us every time of the whole of it, much less of the story with which it was accidentally associated” (Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Rabīndra jībanī, vol. IV (Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati, 1994), pp. 101–11).

Thus, the Indian National Congress adopted the first verse of “Vande mātarām” as a national song in 1937. Thus, in its journey to other parts of India, only the first verse in Sanskrit was recited. The specific religious references were often left out. This shows how the song evolved to represent the entire nation. This controversy also brought to light the challenges of accommodating diverse religious beliefs within the national movement. On a side note, I would like to mention that even though Tagore, himself a part of the Brahmo Samaj, a religious group with a belief in strict monotheism, often used the rich imagery of the mother goddess from the Bengali culture to express deep love and respect for the motherland. Although the song wasn't universally accepted in Bengal, especially by the Muslims in East Pakistan which is now called Bangladesh, due to the political divisions between Muslims and Hindus, they also eventually found a national anthem that would capture the sentiments of love and devotion associated with the mother figure. When Bangladesh became independent

in 1971, the song chosen as its national anthem was a song that Tagore himself composed in 1905. The song begins with this line “amar sonar bamlā, ami tomay bhalobhasi. Here too the land of Bengal is depicted as mother. But she is the familiar everyday mother in her village home who shelters, feeds sings and plays. When Pakistan declared Urdu as its sole national language, the people of East Pakistan, which is now called Bangladesh protested. After gaining independence, the people of Bangladesh found a national anthem that could express their deep love and devotion to the motherly symbol in their culture. This shows how songs and cultural symbols can hold deep meaning and reflect complex historical and political shifts.

The depiction of the mother whose honour is at stake played a crucial role in uniting people under a common cause. This image of a secular mother, one that everyone can relate to regardless of their caste or religion, greatly contributed to fostering unity. It transcended the barriers that often divide communities. In the context of a patriarchal society, it's typically seen as the moral duty of male family members to protect women, and by extension, the honour of the motherland. Those male members who are unable to defend the honour of the country will be perceived as lacking in strength and courage, which can lead to questioning their ability to fulfil this traditional role. This emphasizes how deeply ingrained cultural and societal expectations can influence perceptions of duty and responsibility, even within the broader context of a nation's honour and unity. The image of a secular mother, as depicted in "Vande Mataram," played a pivotal role in bringing people together under a shared purpose, transcending religious, caste, and linguistic differences. It served as a unifying symbol that connected individuals with a common cause beyond the usual divides, fostering a sense of national unity and purpose.

It is interesting to note that in *Anandamath*, Mohendra initially remains unconvinced by the cause of the sannyasis. However, the moment he is urged to protect the honour of *Banga Mata*—Mother Bengal—something shifts within him. His hesitation dissolves, and he is compelled to join the struggle. This transformation hinges on an emotional appeal to the figure of the mother, which proves more persuasive than political reasoning alone. When Bhavananda remarks, “I had a kind of idea that you were a man worth the name, but now I see you are what all the rest of them are, merely the death of ghee and milk,” it is Mohendra's masculinity that is being questioned. His failure to respond to the call of the mother is portrayed not just as a lack of patriotism, but as a failure of manhood itself. The novel thus ties together nationalist duty with masculine honour, reinforcing the symbolic potency of the mother figure in mobilizing men for the anti-colonial cause.

The image of *Bharat Mata* was also very helpful in getting the peasants to join in the fight against the British rulers. It did this without educating the masses about self-rule or *swaraj* and the issues with foreign rule. It was crucial for the educated leaders of the independence movement to have the support of the common people. Without that, the emerging Indian bourgeoisie class wouldn't stand a chance against the British and wouldn't be able to achieve independence. But there was a big problem. Since achieving sovereign powers from the colonial forces was an urgent project, the best feasible way before the nationalist intelligentsia was to appropriate the masses. The biggest challenge they faced at this juncture was the cultural schism that existed between the nationalist elites and the agrarian populace. In other words, there was a “discursive division between those who made the world they inhabited intelligible via modernist discourse, and those who did not.” To solve this problem, they had two options: The first one was that they should educate the common people about why it's important to resist the British and regain control of India. However, this would take a long time because it meant changing the way people thought. Secondly, they could get the

support of the common people even if they didn't completely understand the ideas of the independence movement. This was the more practical choice because it was urgent to gain independence from the British. This is where images like Bharat Mata came in handy. They simplified the reasons for the fight for independence and connected it to familiar gender equations. The figure of Bharat Mata can be traced back to Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's satirical text *Unabimsa Purana* ('The Nineteenth Purana'), first published anonymously in 1866. In this work, Bharat Mata appears as Adhi-Bharati, the widow of Arya Swami—an allegorical embodiment of everything deemed 'Aryan'.

The image of the dispossessed motherland further evolved in Kiran Chandra Bandyopadhyay's play *Bharat Mata*, first staged in 1873, which left a lasting impression on the early nationalist imagination. However, a defining moment in the shaping of this symbol occurred with Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath*. In *Anandamath*, the figure of the mother undergoes an evolutionary transformation marked by three distinct phases:

The first image of goddess that is shown in the novel is the idol of Jagaddhatri the "Mother as she was." This image of goddess is glorious. She sits on a lotus throne over wild beasts, representing the past age of glory and greatness. This implies a past when the nation was autonomous, free from alien domination. Such an image is very much a representation of India's past before colonial domination. It is colorful, well-ordered, and full of potential for wealth and culture. Her victory over the savage beasts may be interpreted as a metaphor for India's ancient civilization's power to overcome chaos and impose harmony.

The description of the goddess mentioned in the novel is worth quoting in this context. The description of the goddess goes as follows. "She trampled underfoot the elephants of the forest and all wild beasts and in the haunt of the wild beasts she erected her lotus throne. She was covered with every ornament, full of laughter and beauty. She was in hue like the young sun, splendid with all opulence and empire. Bow down to the Mother."

In stark contrast to the first image is the second one. The second image found is that of Kali—the "Mother as she now is." It is gruesome, adorned with skulls, riding on Shiva, and in a shroud of darkness. She is stationed in a cemetery. This is how she is portrayed in the novel. Kali is enveloped in darkness, full of blackness and gloom. She is stripped of all, therefore naked. Today the whole country is a burial ground, therefore is the Mother garlanded with skulls. Her own God she tramples under her feet. Alas, my Mother!" This form depicts the devastation brought by colonialism: a people debased from its dignity reduced to death and quiet. And yet, there is more than melancholy about the fierce imagery of Kali. The club and skull she holds imply potential power; she is not helpless, but passive. The Brahmacharin's observation—"We have only just given weapons into our Mother's hands"—admonishes the people to the role they must play in resurrecting the sleeping power of rebellion. Kali is therefore a metaphor for pent-up anger and pent-up energy waiting for the people to act upon it so that it may develop into revolution.

The ultimate vision is the idol of Ten-armed Durga—"the Mother as she shall be." She is bathed in golden rays. She is victorious, and is accompanied by Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartikeya, and Ganesh. She stands for an ideal future with the Mother as the completely empowered being. Each divine associate symbolizes an essential aspect of national resurgence: prosperity, learning, strength, and success. The ten arms of Durga go in all directions, symbolizing unity in diversity and a pan-Indian nationalist vision. This represents the political desire for a free, independent, and shining India, which is capable of surmounting all obstacles. The description of the goddess is as follows.

“Suddenly the rays of the morning sun shone in their eyes and from every side the sweet-voiced family of birds shrilled in song. In a wide temple built in stone of marble they saw a beautifully fashioned image of the Ten-armed Goddess made in gold, laughing and radiant in the light of the early sun. The ascetic saluted the image and said, “This is the Mother as she shall be. Her ten arms are extended towards the ten regions and they bear many a force imaged in her manifold weapons; her enemies are trampled under her feet and the lion on which her foot rests, is busy destroying the foe. Behold her, with the regions for her arms,” — as he spoke, Satyananda began to sob, — “with the regions for her arms, wielder of manifold weapons, trampler down of her foes, with the lion-heart for the steed of her riding; on her right Lakshmi as Prosperity, on her left Speech, giver of learning and science, Kartikeya with her as Strength, Ganesh as Success.

These shifting images reflect a growing nationalist sentiment seeking to harness familiar religious iconography to broaden its popular appeal. Jasodhara Bagchi observes that *Anandamath* also represents Bankim’s ideological response to the Western positivist doctrines of order and progress, articulating a uniquely Indian vision of transformation rooted in cultural and spiritual revival. As nationalist sentiment deepened in colonial India, the symbolic representation of the nation also underwent a significant transformation, particularly in visual and iconographic terms. The abstract concept of the motherland began to take on divine form, drawing heavily from the religious imagination of the time. One of the most influential shifts in this symbolic language occurred with the work of the artist Abanindranath Tagore. He played a critical role in shaping the visual culture of Indian nationalism through his iconic painting of *Bharat Mata*. In Tagore’s rendering, *Bharat Mata* was no longer merely a metaphor for the motherland or a literary figure; she was elevated to the status of a deity. Drawing upon the iconography of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, abundance, and prosperity, Tagore portrayed *Bharat Mata* as a serene and benevolent figure. She was dressed not in royal or martial attire, but in the humble robes of a Vaishnava nun, suggesting both spiritual authority and renunciation. Her hands held symbolic objects—a book, sheaves of rice, a piece of white cloth, and a rosary—representing learning, sustenance, self-reliance, and devotion. This image carried profound political resonance. This portrayal invited a devotional response to the nation itself by merging nationalist aspirations with sacred imagery. It called upon the people not merely to admire or serve the nation, but to revere and protect her as one would a divine mother. Thus, the figure of *Bharat Mata* emerged not just as a symbol of land, but as a spiritual embodiment of collective identity and aspiration.

Having analyzed all the major points, let us now wrap up this lesson. The song "Vande Mataram" is the national song of India, signifying deep patriotism and love for the country. Initially created by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay in the context of Bengal, it expressed reverence for the motherland. Over time, it transcended religious and regional boundaries to foster political unity among people during India's struggle for independence. Despite its religious roots, the song evolved to represent a more secular image of a mother that everyone could relate to, helping bridge cultural divides. While it faced controversies and objections from some religious groups, the Indian National Congress adopted the first verse as the national song in 1937, emphasizing its unifying role in the independence movement. This evolution of the song highlights the challenges of accommodating diverse religious beliefs within a national context and the power of cultural symbols in expressing love and devotion for the motherland. The portrayal of a mother figure whose honor is at stake served as a unifying symbol, fostering unity among people from diverse backgrounds regardless of caste or religion. This image of a secular mother transcended societal barriers and resonated in a

patriarchal society where it was considered the moral duty of male family members to protect women and the motherland's honor. Failure to defend the country's honor was seen as a lack of strength and courage. This highlights how deeply ingrained cultural and societal expectations influenced perceptions of duty and responsibility. "Vande Mataram" played a pivotal role in uniting people under a common purpose, transcending divisions and promoting a sense of national unity. I hope you understood these lessons well. Thank you!