

‘VANDEMATARAM’- A NATIONAL IDENTITY; BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTERJEE: SOCIAL & RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT: Vandemataram was the whole nation’s thought and motto for freedom during independence movement. Nationalistic feelings and nationalism require an emotional platform from where and through which we can express our feelings for the country. Vandemataram was a mantra that gave by Bankim which managed to convert the whole people to the religion of patriotism overnight.

There was a gradual change from rationalistic approach to the belief of overall development of individual in Bankim. He strongly believed and worked like Vivekananda and Aurobindo for fusion of eastern spiritualism and western materialism. In their opinion, this was the only answer to the multitudes of ills afflicting the Indian people.

Bankim also believed like Aurobindo that science has only limited sphere to understand religion and spiritual truths.

He was for the right to remarry of widows though he was not particularly in favour of social reforms at superficial level.

He strongly believed that education would only be the solution for all social evils which included foreign economic exploitation, the poverty of the peasantry and oppression of women.

Bankim came out in support of the ancient social system wherein everything harmoniously occupied its place facilitating a smooth run of social institutions in which individual was visualized as an ideal person performing his own dharma for the sake of social system. He said through his novel, Anand Math that self discipline along with moral strength and organizational training is essential for the liberation of the country which is even relevant now. The most important element of moral strength conveyed by him was the infusion of religious feeling into patriotic work.

The universally recognized supreme service of Bankim to the nation lay in his providing a vision of the mother. It can be said with justification that the bare intellectual idea of the mother land in itself does not come as a driving force, the mere recognition of desirability of freedom is insufficient as an inspiring motive. But, he let the motherland reveal to the eye of the mind as something more than a stretch of earth or mass of individuals and let her take shape as a great divine and material power in a form of beauty that can dominate the mind and size the heart, the scenario is altered dramatically. With such an appeal, Bankim was become successful in giving birth to a patriotism that was capable of working miracles and saving nation from doom.

KEY WORDS:-Vandemataram, Anand Math, Patriotism, miracles, Mother Land

INTRODUCTION:

Bankim, the composer of India’s national song, vandemataram, personifying India as mother goddess was inspired freedom movement of India in a huge way.

Vandemataram is a Bengali poem of Bankim, written in 1870, which he included in his 1881 novel Anandamath. Vandemataram was first sung by Ravindranath Tagore at 1896 session of Indian National Congress became a popular marching song for political activism and freedom movement. The song and the novel containing it was banned by the British government but workers and general public defied the ban, and many went to prisons repeatedly for singing it. In 1950, the first two verses of the song were declared the national song of the republic of India distinct from the national anthem of India.

The first two verses of the song are in reference to mother and motherland and do not mention any deity by name unlike later verses are mentioning of goddesses. Here in this paper I am not going deep into the controversy of making vandemataram compulsory in educational institutions and other places but confining myself only to social and religious philosophy of Bankim under the circumstances who tried to provide a strong base for nationalistic feelings through his writings among which the song, vandemataram gives an electrifying feeling and a sense of pride and honour for the nation. We always need a medium through which we express our feelings and that is undoubtedly the song vandemataram, to them during independence movement and to us now.

II

Any nation that is metamorphosing into a new self needs a fit and satisfying medium of expression, which survives to give permanent shapes to its thoughts and feelings and carries every new impulse quickly and triumphantly into the consciousness of all. Without the instrument of such a medium, proper growth is not feasible. In the case of India Bankim’s literature serves to exemplify this philosophy. His writings came like a fresh breeze that strove to reform and secularize social institutions and was the first to include patriotic feelings within the hearts of the people for their motherland.1

Bankim came from a Brahmin family which increased both its wealth and status through contacts with the English. He was among the first to graduate from the Calcutta University and was appointed as deputy magistrate immediately after graduation. He held this post until his retirement in 1891. Originally, Bankim adopted the rationalist path, one who firmly believed in science and

was influenced by Comte, Mill and Spencer, but there was a gradual change in his views as he came about to be a saint who believed in the overall development of individual feeling that the purification of Hindu religion was the sole answer to Indian problems.²

Initially, Bankim wholeheartedly accepted the enlightenment belief in the perfectibility of man and shared the positivist view of looking at the history of social institutions as evolving from less developed and imperfect forms to more developed and perfect ones. "In worldly matters I accept the teachings of science in demonstrating that the world is gradually evolving from an incomplete and underdeveloped state towards a complete and developed form."³

In line with such a view, he expressed his acceptance of free trade as being a more developed form of economic organization than anything that had existed previously. He was convinced that trade with Britain had led to an expansion of agricultural activity in India. Bankim argued that anything that was bought from England was paid for exporting agricultural commodities such as rice, silk, cotton, jute, indigo etc. In the result there would be an expansion of agriculture in this country. He suggested that if it was becoming difficult for the Indian weavers to compete with imported textiles, logical course for them to shift to activities of cultivation which were expanding as a result of this trade. He argued that the real reason why weavers were not seizing the opportunities opened up by expanding agricultural activities was cultural in nature. He castigated the people for being reluctant to give up their hereditary trades, and said that though it was unfortunate for the weavers, it did not necessitate a loss of wealth for the country.⁴

The sorry plight of the Bengali peasantry was solely the result of greed and rapacity of a segment of the land lords, he felt and incorporated some instances of this sort in his book, Samya. He thought that the only way out was that the land lords had mend to mend their ways.⁵

Bankim compared the colonial order in India with a historical reconstruction of the Brahmanical order and had to agree that the British rule had indeed established a fairer and more impersonal legal and judicial system, greater access – at least in principle- for the lower castes to position of power and status, and had made available the means for Indians to acquire the benefits of western science and literature. Bankim insisted that the prevailing social mores could be improved by imitating the British. He said that everyone learnt by imitation, just as children learnt to speak by imitating. Bankim's early views are thus characterized by a favorable stand towards the British rule going to the extent of advocating an imitation of their ways, and are in parallel with those of Syed Ahmed Khan. However, the overall objective of the two was completely different. While Syed stuck to his views for his entire life striving for the betterment of his own community, Bankim was later transformed and came about to treading a path similar to the one taken by Vivekananda and Aurobindo, who worked for the fusion of eastern spiritualism and western materialism. This, in their opinion, was the only answer to the multitudes of ills afflicting the Indian populace.

III

Religious Philosophy:

Bankim advocated the fusion (eastern spiritualism and western materialism) line of thought in a long tract he wrote in 1884 entitled 'The Theory of Religion'. He set out his concept of anusilana through this work which was in the form of a dialogue between a teacher and his pupil. According to him, anusilana was based on the concept of bhakti – a wide and embracing idea that implied the unity of knowledge and duty.⁶

Bankim believed that mere knowledge would be unable to create bhakti; for that knowledge would have to be united with duty. Duty, he explained, meant the performance of acts without the expectation of a reward. Amplifying this concept, he said that just as to eat is one's duty, so is the defending of one's country. He stressed that these acts were to be performed because they should be performed, and not because they might produce beneficial results. It was this non-possessive, non-utilitarian concept of duty that was in his opinion at the core of dharma or religion.⁷

Bankim felt that though the west had a superior culture, the advance was only partial: for he was certain that the east was much ahead spiritually. In the prevailing circumstances, it was thus necessary to cultivate a cultural ideal in which the industries and the science of the west could be learnt and emulated while retaining the spiritual greatness of eastern culture. He dubbed it the 'National Cultural Project'.

Bankim felt that an element of elitism' had become inescapable, for the act of cultural revival could only be performed by the so-called supremely cultivated and refined intellect. He foresaw it as a project of national culture regeneration in which intelligentsia would lead and the nation would follow. Thus, this national cultural ideal of the complete and perfect man which was to be aspired for an approximated by practice, was Bankim's concept of anusilana.

He was infact not naive enough to believe that large masses of people would be able to reach this perfection. "I do not entertain much hope in this time that the ordinary Hindu would understand the religion of anusilana. But a national character is built out of the national religion.... I do expect that if intellectuals accept this religion, a national character will finally be built."⁸

Thus Bankim's views were in line with those of other renaissance leaders like Aurobindo, Vivekananda who advocated the fusion of western and eastern cultures as a prerequisite for the perfection of individual life. He too desired this to be through the intellectuals to the masses.

Bankim felt that the national religion could bring under its fold and shape and lives of even those who understood nothing of religion. Few people ever understood the subtle intricacies of religious thought, he argued, and most merely accepted and imitated the example set by those who did understand.⁹

In the epilogue of Raja Sinha Bankim says:

... This novel was written not to differentiate between Hindus and Muslims.... In statesmanship Muslims undoubtedly were better than contemporary Hindus... one who possesses, among other virtues; dharma, no matter if he be a Hindu or a muslim, is the best..... Aurangzeb had no dharma, whereas Raja Sinha had it, and so he could defeat the superior, even though he was the lord of a very small dominion. This only had been upheld in the novel.¹⁰

The following extract from the original edition of Sita Ram which was deleted from subsequent editions throws significant light on the attitude of Bankim: The Fakir said: "Son I hear that you have come to found a Hindu dominion; but if you be a slave to popular prejudices you will fail to achieve your aim. If you do not consider Hindus and Muslims as equals, then in this land inhabited by both Hindu and Muslims as equals, you will fail to keep your kingdom intact. Your projected Dharmarajya will degenerate into realm of sin."¹¹

As far as science and religion is concerned, Bankim's views were in harmony with those expressed by Aurobindo. Bankim felt that science recognized two types of proofs: One based on direct sense of perception and the second relying on inference based on sense perception. He held that neither was sufficient to prove the existence of the soul and as such empirical science was not in position to construct a true philosophy of spirit.¹²

He felt science was handicapped, because it was beyond its powers to perceive the soul. He argued that if a driver is tied by a rope to his boat, he would be able to search for the bottom of the sea only as far as his rope would permit and it would be beyond his powers to gather all the treasures which were held by the sea. Similarly, science too was tied to its epistemic leash: it was futile to expect it to find a philosophy of spirit that lay beyond its range of proof. Where science could not reach, it had no privilege, he asserted. The best it could do was to consider itself beholder by resting on the lowest steps of that stairway which led up to the higher reaches. To look for a scientific proof where it could not apply was a fundamental mistaken search, in his opinion. Bankim however, added that based on personal knowledge and belief he could assert with authority that if all one's mental faculties were suitably developed, the knowledge of the philosophy of spirit would become transcendently true. He criticized those who tended to use the findings of a limited and imperfect science to ridicule the philosophy of spirit. He said that such people needed to be told that the philosophy of spirit was beyond the limits of western science, not opposed to it.¹³

IV

Social philosophy:

Though never openly disagreeing with the reforms, Bankim nevertheless subjected to ruthless questioning both the mode of reasoning employed by the reformers and their means for achieving the reforms. He held that if reforms were to succeed they had to flow from a new moral consensus in society. He felt that this new morality was an inevitable consequence of changes in the economic and social conditions of living in the modern age, and therefore a new pattern of beliefs and practices would emerge on its own. He stressed that such a development, the key to whose transformation had to lie in a regeneration of national and spiritual values, would make reform by legislation redundant. It is thus evident that Bankim saw the remedy for cultural backwardness not in more reform, but in a total regeneration of national culture or, as he preferred to call it, the development of a national religion, the centrality of a rational philosophy of power within an entire moral project to national regeneration.

Bankim's view on widow remarriages provides an interesting insight into his mode of thinking. His essay on Samya contains his line of argument that the question of widow remarriage being good or bad was meaningless. There could be no generalization on the issue in his opinion, because the remarriage of all widows could never be good, conceding at the same time that widow's should have the right to remarry. In the conclusion of his book, on equality Bankim referred to education as 'the means to eliminate all social evils', which included foreign economic exploitation, the poverty of the peasantry and the oppression of women.¹⁴

Political Philosophy:

Bankim had a well perceived view of the political as well as the linguistic needs of the country's future.

As a foundation to this, he first understood the hollowness and futility of the method of political agitation prevailing in his time. He subjected it to merciless satire in his Lokarahaṣya and KamalakantaDaptar. Bankim was the first among those who realized that the communication gap between those who had received English education and those who had not had to be bridged. As opposed to this cherished ideal, the decline of the Indian people in Bankim's opinion, found parallels in the European situation too. There, he argued had been a complete divorce between its religious and political practices. He said that though Europe's religion idealized the humble and peace loving and merciful renunciator, its politics could be seen to be a battle field of violent forces wholly dedicated to the pursuit of worldly goods.

The Indian society, too in his opinion, had suffered a similar fate with the supreme ideal represented by Krishna of the Mahabharata, after getting trivialized to the Krishna celebrated in popular cults and festivities. If there was to be a national regeneration, Bankim saw a pressing need for the reestablishment of a harmonious unity of religion and politics, harmony between a comprehensive ethical ideal and the practice of power.¹⁵

Bankim thus came out in support of the ancient social system wherein everything harmoniously occupied its place facilitating a smooth run of the social institutions, in which individual was visualized as an ideal person performing his own dharma(duty) for the sake of the social organizations. Bankim demonstrated a matching wavelength while proclaiming in Anand Math that self discipline was essential for the liberation of the motherland. He argued that the true fulfillment of human life consisted of the fullest and most consistent development of all human faculties. He felt that a person whose life showed this full and consistent development would be the ideal man, as embodied by the mythological figure of Krishna, who he felt being the householder, diplomat, warrior, law giver, saint and preacher, represented a complete human ideal.¹⁶

V

Nationalist Philosophy:

He positioned unflinching moral strength as the single most important virtue which together with its associated elements would be instrumental in the general upliftment of the country. The first element of moral strength that he perceived was tyaga, complete self sacrifice for the country and complete self devotion to the work of liberation. The striking feature of his workers

and fighters for the country is that they were characterized as political ‘byrages’, who had no other thought, than their duty to the country. They put all other behind them as less dear and less precious and only to be resumed when their work for the country was done.¹⁷

The next element of moral strength that was needed according to Bankim was self discipline and organization. His views on this count were manifest in the elaborate training of Devi Choudharani for her work. In addition this feature was evident in the strict rules of the association of the Anand Math put forward by him, as well as in the pictures of perfect organizations which these books contain. The final element of moral strength conveyed by him was the infusion of religious feeling into patriotic work. The religion of patriotism is one idea that stands apart in all of Bankim’s writings. An indication of this is visible in Devi Choudharani, while in Darmatattwa and Krishnamachari the idea and the picture of a perfect and multifaceted karma yoga is sketched, the grand climax of which was to be the work for one’s country and one’s kind. Bankim struck this idea as the key note of his literary triumph, the Anand Math, which received its ideal lyrical expression in the outstanding song, VandeMataram . As Aurobindo pointed out, ‘...this is the second great service of Bankim to this country that he pointed out to it the way of salvation and gave it the religion of patriotism.’¹⁸

Bankim avoided attributing the moral sense to a mere outgrowth of environmental socio- economic conditions. On the contrary he preferred to attribute an element of divinity to it, for in his view, irrespective of any environmental changes that occur, self control and tyaga would always be a means to the attainment of ends. This essentially was the core of the culture for Bankim and is reflected in all his novels.¹⁹

The universally recognized supreme service of Bankim to the nation lay in his providing a vision of the mother. It can be said with justification that the bare intellectual idea of the mother land in itself does not come as a driving force, the mere recognition of desirability of freedom is insufficient as an inspiring motive. But let the motherland reveal herself to the eye of the mind as something more than a stretch of earth or a mass of individuals; let her take shape as a great divine and material power in a form of beauty that can dominate the mind and seize the heart, the scenario is altered dramatically. With such an appeal, Bankim was become successful in shaping patriotism that was capable of working miracles and saving a nation from doom. Vandemataram was a mantra that given by him that managed to convert a whole people to the religion of patriotism overnight. To the people, it was as if the mother had revealed herself.

Aurobindo also describes it as, “A great and vivifying message had to be given to a nation or humanity, and God has chosen this mouth on which to shape the words of the message. A momentous vision had to be revealed, and it is his eyes which the Almighty first unseals. The message which he has received, the vision which has been vouchsafed to him, he declares to the world with all the strength that is in him, and in one supreme moment of inspiration expresses it in words. Which have merely to be uttered to stir men’s inmost natures, clarify their minds, seize their hearts and impel them to things which would have been impossible to them in their ordinary moments.”²⁰

Conclusion:

In India, the process of secularization was not a war against feudal system, as had been in the case of Europe, but against the foreign rule. Here too, the difference was that religion did not take sides with the colonial rulers but served to provide an emotional support, a sheet anchor to the seething feeling of nationalism, having an ancient culture with its resplendent unity in diversity to fall back upon.

Thus, Bankim strove to create an emotional fervor in favour of the motherland, coming up in the process with the unparalleled magic mantra of VandeMataram, which had a deep emotional influence on the masses. Being a government employee, he could not come out openly against the British rule to express his views and actively participate in the nationalist agitation – a feeling that nagged him throughout his life. This was reflected as helplessness and frustration of the lead character in his writings. Still he was the one who succeeded in showing the nation as a mother and stirred up nationalistic feelings among the people. Bankim’s views underwent marked transformation towards the last phase of his life. He even withdrew the book on Samya from circulation and remained as a karma yogi and yet led the life of a complete ascetic.

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