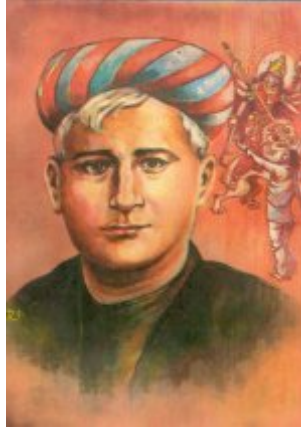


Bankim Chandra



Vande Mataram

Sujalam Sujhalam

Malayajasheetalam

Sasyashyamalam Mataram II

There is hardly an Indian who is not familiar with this National Song. Possibly, most of us do not know who composed this song. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote many novels. One of them is 'Anandamatha'. This novel contains a thrilling account of a struggle for freedom. 'Vande Mataram' appears as a part of this novel.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was born on 27th June 1838 in the village Kantalpara of the Twenty-four Paraganas District of Bengal. He belonged to a family of Brahmins. The family was well known for the performance of yagas (sacrifices).

Bankim Chandra's father Yadav Chandra Chattopadhyaya was in government service. In the very year of his son's birth he went to Midnapur as Deputy Collector. Bankim Chandra's mother was a Pious, good and affectionate lady.

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The word 'Bankim Chandra' means in Bengali 'the moon on the second day of the bright fortnight'. The moon in the bright half of the month grows and fills out day by day. Bankim Chandra's parents probably wished that the honor of their family should grow from strength to strength through this child, and therefore called him Bankim Chandra.

Bankim Chandra's education began in Midnapur. Even as a boy he was exceptionally brilliant. He learnt the entire alphabet in one day. Elders wondered at this marvel. For long time Bankim Chandra's intelligence was the talk of the town. Whenever they came across a very intelligent student, teachers of Midnapur would exclaim, "Ah, there is another Bankim Chandra in the making".

Bankim Chandra finished his early education at Midnapur. He joined the Mohsin College at Hoogly and studied there for six years. Even there he was known for his brilliance. His teachers were all admiration for his intelligence. With the greatest ease Bankim Chandra passed his examinations in the first class and won many prizes.

He was not very enthusiastic about sports. But he was not a student who was glued to his textbooks. Much of his leisure was spent in reading books other than his texts. He was very much interested in the study of Sanskrit. He would read and understand Sanskrit books on his own. He was struck by the beauty of that language. Bankim Chandra's study of Sanskrit stood him in good stead. Later when he wrote books in Bengali this background of Sanskrit was of great help to him.

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There was no set rule for his study of books. It was enough that a particular book attracted his attention. He would pore over it for hours on end in some corner of the college library. He used to spend most of the academic year in this way, reading books other than his texts. And as the examinations drew near he would race through the texts. But it made no difference for, as usual, he would pass in the first class, and win prizes. And then again he would keep away from texts.

In 1856 he joined the Presidency College in Calcutta. The next Year, in 1857, soldiers of the Indian army rose in mutiny; the mutiny was bid to gain freedom. Calcutta was all confusion during this time. But Bankim Chandra's studies went on as usual. He sat for the B.A. Examination along with eleven candidates. Both Bankim Chandra and his friend Yadunath Bose passed. The Lieutenant Governor of Calcutta appointed Bankim Chandra as Deputy Collector in the same year. We may recall that his father Yadav Chandra had also rendered service as Deputy Collector. According to his father's wishes Bankim Chandra accepted the appointment. He was then twenty years old. Having developed an interest in the study of Law he got through effortlessly in the B. L. Degree examination, too.

Bankim Chandra was appointed Deputy Magistrate. He was in Government service for thirty-two years and retired in 1891. He was a very conscientious worker. Most of his officers were Englishmen. They were a proud lot for they were the ruling power of this country. Bankim Chandra never submitted to their proud, unjust or stubborn behavior. Wasn't he the author of the inspiring and patriotic

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'Anandamatha' and the song Vande Mataram'? He was true to their spirit. He would resist any unjust person and teach him a lesson. Because of this some of the British officers were displeased with him and he had to face their hostility. They harassed him. Bankim Chandra bore everything with patience. He worked hard and with integrity. Yet he never got the high position that he so much deserved!

Bankim Chandra would never sacrifice justice or self-respect. The arrogance of the white men never frightened him. When he was a Deputy Magistrate there was a superior officer named Munro, who was the Commissioner (the head of the province). Bankim Chandra met Munro near Eden Garden once. A British officer in those days expected any subordinate Indian official to show him respects by bowing modestly before him. But Bankim Chandra just walked past Munro. Munro was enraged. He transferred Bankim Chandra to a different place.

There were many such incidents during his service. His self-respecting behavior angered the British officer. As a result he was often transferred from place to place and much harassed.

His official career was full of such troubles. There were also some unhappy incidents in his personal life. Bankim Chandra was married when he was only eleven and his wife was five years old! Within a year-or two of his appointment as a Deputy Collector at Jessore he lost his wife. Bankim Chandra was only twenty-two then. The death of his young and beautiful wife made him very unhappy. After some time he married again. His second wife was Rajalakshmi

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Devi. They had three daughters but no son. Bankim Chandra's youngest daughter Utpala kumari is said to have committed suicide.

When he was in Jessore, Bankim Chandra met a person by name Deenabandhu Mitra. He was a renowned Bengali dramatist of the time. They became very great friends. Bankim Chandra dedicated his 'Anandamatha' to the memory of his dead friend Deenabandhu Mitra.

In due course Bankim Chandra emerged as a great writer in Bengali. He wrote novels and poems. He wrote articles, which stimulated impartial thinking. He became well known outside Bengal, too. His novels have been translated into many Indian languages.

How did he become such a great writer?

He was an exceptionally intelligent man. He read with interest books by established authors. And he used to say that his success was also due to the blessings showered on him by elders. Bankim Chandra regarded his parents with deep reverence and devotion. Whenever he went on a pilgrimage he would wash their revered feet and take that sacred water.

There were other factors, which helped in his writing. He belonged to an orthodox family. So he was familiar with the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha right from his childhood. These epics made a lasting impression on him. A variety of experiences - some of them sweet, and some bitter - came to him in his life. And these must have been stored in his memory. Bankim Chandra had traveled widely. He worked in several offices. So he came across

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many types of people. They were of different kinds'- some good, some bad, some humble, some snobbish, some intelligent and some dull. This vast knowledge of life and men is very well reflected in the characters he created in his novels.

When Bankim Chandra started writing, there was a new spirit, an awakening all over Bengal. People thought along new lines. The conditions of our country must improve; we must realize our shortcomings and improve ourselves - such were the thoughts of the people. Some persons toiled hard to translate these wishes into action. Raja Rammohan Roy was one such reformer. He worked for a new system of education, for a free flow of new ideas from outside the country and to wipe off the blind beliefs of the people. Another great son of Bengal, Ishwarachandra Vidyasagar, worked for the progress of Bengali language and society. Many were the people who worked with similar ideas to improve the country. Patriotism grew stronger and a new enthusiasm was in evidence every where. Thus the very atmosphere was inspiring.

Bankim Chandra first wrote poems. Then he wrote a novel in English. But after this he began to write novels in, Bengali. He wrote while still in service. Because of constant pinpricks he grew weary of service. He felt that government service curbed his freedom and challenged his self-respect. So he asked for permission to retire, though he was only fifty-three years old.

But his superior officers were displeased with him. So they would not even allow him to retire. When a new Lieutenant Governor, Charles Eliot by name, was posted, Bankim Chandra approached

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him. He told him that he wished to write books and needed leisure. I would like to retire. Please allow me to do so," he requested Eliot. He agreed. At last Bankim Chandra was free. He was retired on a pension of four hundred rupees a month.

When Bankim Chandra retired he was eager to write many books. But he was not able to devote many years to writing on a large scale. His health soon declined and he died in 1894 when he was only fifty-six.

Towards his end, he grew very philosophical. He lost all interest in worldly pleasure. Though he was ailing for quite sometime he refused medicine.

The doctor said to him, "If you don't take medicine you may not live long; you are inviting death."

"Who says I have refused medicine? I have been using it all along," replied Bankim Chandra.

The doctor was surprised. "But where is the medicine? Let me see," he said.

Bankim Chandra took in his hand the copy of the Bhagavad Gita that was by his side and said, "Here this is my medicine."

The study of the Bhagavad Geeta gradually changed his very temperament itself. He gave up writing novels. Philosophy and thoughts of God filled his writing. He wrote 'Krishna Charitra', and books on religion. He began the translation of the Geeta and the Vedas. But he died before he could complete the translation of the Vedas.

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Bankim Chandra was a very refined person. Rabindranath Tagore, the world famous poet of India, has related an incident about Bankim Chandra.

There was a gathering. People were talking in-groups. One of them was reading Sanskrit verses composed by him. Bankim was standing nearby. The subject of the composition was patriotism. As the poet read, he made a remark making fun of Indians in poverty. When Bankim heard the remark he covered his face and left the place at once.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa, one of the great sons of India, and Bankim Chandra were acquaintances. The word 'Bankim' also means 'that which is bent'. Sri Ramakrishna once jokingly asked Bankim Chandra, "What is it that has bent you?" "The kick of the Englishman's shoe," Bankim replied. Sri Ramakrishna was acquainted with Bankim Chandra's historical novels, too. When Swami Vivekananda was still known as Narendranath, Sri Ramakrishna had sent him to Bankim Chandra.

'There was a big forest. There were trees of many kinds. Branches and leaves were dense and interwoven. Sunlight could hardly penetrate through these leaves. There were leaves and leaves everywhere; they seemed endless. It was dark, pitch dark. Even in broad day, light the forest was dim and fearful. People did not dare enter the forest; there was not a sound other than the rustle of the leaves and the cry of wild animals and birds.'

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Imagine the forest. It is midnight. The forest is dark, terrifyingly dark. And there is not a single sound. And, in this darkness and silence suddenly a man's voice is heard.

'Will not my heart's desire be fulfilled?'

There is silence.

Again the voice:

'Will not my heart's desire be fulfilled?'

Silence again.

Once again the voice asks:

'Will not my heart's desire be fulfilled?'

Now there is an answer. But what an answer. The answer is a question and a challenge. 'What will you offer in return?'

The first voice replies, 'All that belongs to me I am ready to give up. I shall even give my life.'

'What is a life after all? Anybody can give that.'

'What else then? What else can I give?'

Pat, comes the answer, 'Dedication.'

What an interesting story! The deep and dense forest, the pitch black night, the silence.....and a human voice is heard. A thrilling situation. What a question! And What an answer! One cannot put the book down until the last page is turned.

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The passage quoted here appear the beginning of the novel 'Anandamatha' mentioned earlier with reference to our National Song Vande Mataram'.

Is it surprising that people read Bankim Chandra's novels eagerly?

Bankim Chandra had founded a journal called 'Vangadarshan'. 'Anandamatha' appeared in installments in this monthly journal. In 1882 it appeared in book form. Soon the copies were sold out and the book was reprinted. The second edition, too, was soon sold out. During Bankim Chandra's lifetime alone, in ten years 'Anandamatha' was reprinted five times.

Readers found reading a Bankim Chandra's novel an altogether new kind of experience. The people of Bengal were fascinated by his novels. When the novels were translated into other Indian languages they delighted the new readers, too.

Bankim came to be regarded as one of Bengal's treasures; this was because of his novels.

Bankim Chandra had given thought to the question of a writer's style. A novelist tells a story. How should he write? His language must be the language of the people - language they can understand; he must write as they speak, thought Bankim Chandra. He wrote in that manner. Though his language was close to the spoken form of his day, it was attractive. The Bengali language acquired a new dignity because of his writings.

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Bankim wrote fifteen novels in all.

'Durgeshanandhini', 'Kapalkundala', 'Mrinalini', 'Chandrashekar' and 'Rajsimha' are well known for their interesting stories. 'Anandamatha', 'Devi Chowdhurani' and 'Seethararn' are based on the history of our land. Bankim was a keen observer of the life of the people around him; and he used to reflect deeply on what was right and what was wrong in the social life of his day. 'Vishavriksha', 'Indira', 'Yugalanguriya', 'Radharani', 'Rajani', and 'Krishna kanther Will' - these reflect the good and the bad in society.

'Anandamatha', appeared in installments. People used to read one installment, --, in 'Vangadarshan' and wait impatiently for the next installment. We have already read the beginning of 'Anandamatha'. How interesting it is! How it compels us to read on and find out what happens next! Read it again. How vivid and absorbing is the description of the forest, isn't it? But read again, you will see there is something more. In the darkness and total silence a human voice is heard. The entire description is symbolic. The story of 'Anandamatha' depicts the struggle for freedom that took place in Bengal in the year 1773. That was the year of a terrible famine in Bengal. The white men who ruled were indifferent to the hardship of the people and the people feared their masters. Life in Bengal was full of misery. But people did not have the courage to talk about it openly. So there was darkness in Bengal and the silence of misery. In such an age one noble man, Satyananda, yearns to end the sufferings of his Motherland. The country has become a wilderness, darkness and silence rule; and a lonely voice asks, "Is it possible that my wish will

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be fulfilled?" It is- the voice of Satyananda, yearning to bring freedom and happiness to his country.

The story of 'Anandamatha' begins with a description of the terrible famine in Bengal, in a village called Padachinha there is a wealthy man. He is Mahendra; his wife is Kalyani. They have a child. The famine forces them to leave the village. They get lost in the forest. Kalyani and the child are captured by famine--stricken people. Fortunately she escapes with the child. Satyananda is the chief of a group of sanyasins called the Santanas. Kalyani takes shelter with him. He sends Bhavananda, a sanyasin, to search for Kalyani's husband. Bhavananda comes upon Mahendra. Both of them are captured by soldiers of the British Company which was ruling Bengal. They are bound with ropes and dumped into a bullock cart, which was carrying boxes of money. Bhavananda and Mahendra manage to escape by cutting the ropes. Later the sanyasins seize the money-laden boxes.

Mahendra is reunited with his wife. He joins the Santana group with her consent; he wants to take part in the freedom struggle. In the meantime Kalyani is drowned, and saved by Jeevananda, another sanyasin. He leaves her with his wife and his sister.

The famine grows worse. The village is nothing but a wilderness. Wild animals from the forest roam about there and robbers prowl. Warren Hastings, the Governor General of India, appoints one Captain Thomas to suppress the Santanas-Thomas is defeated and killed. On the side of the Santanas, after a heroic

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fight, Bhavananada breathes his last with the song 'Vande Mataram' on his lips.

Victorious, Sathyananda returns to Anandamatha. There he is met by a great man who prophesies, "The era of Muslim power is over. Put an end to this war; there have been enough deaths. The British will be in power and right now it is not possible to conquer them. They will- continue to rule as long as the Hindus are ignorant, degraded and weak." So, Sathyananda is still angry and vexed, for he does not want the British to rule, either.

That is the end of the novel.

The story sustains interest to the end. As he watches the joys and sorrows, the victories and defeats of the characters, he is eager to find out what happens next. Besides, these men and women are not gods and goddesses, but men and women like us. The Santanans, too, are ordinary folk, sons of the soil, who have dedicated themselves to the service of their Motherland.

'Anandamatha' is mainly a novel of patriotism. It is the story of people who live and die for their country. Here even the sanyasins' play an admirable role in the struggle of freedom. Shanthi, the wife of Jeevananda, is one such heroic sanyasini.

She dons men's clothes and when necessary wears moustaches and a beard. She boldly moves about in the midst of the enemies. She even succeeds in deceiving officers of the British army. She wins their confidence and sends information to Satyananda.

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Bhavananda says to Mahendra: "We recognize no other Mother. Our Mother-land is our Mother. We have no other- mother, no father, no wife, no children, no home and no family; we have only this Sujala, Suphala, Malayajasheetala."

Anybody who wishes to become a Santana has to take an oath in the presence of the Mother. Satyananda questions them and they reply. Even to this day this part of the novel purifies the mind of the reader.

"Will you give up your homes till your Motherland is liberated?"

"We will."

"Will you leave your- mother, fat brothers and sisters?"

"We will."

"Your wife and children?"

"Yes."

"Wealth, comfort, everything?"

"Yes, we shall give up everything."

"You shall not retreat from the battlefield."

"We will not."

"Will you give up caste? All Santanas belong to a single caste. There is no distinction of Brahmin and Sudra in this sacred task. Are you prepared?"

"We have no caste. We are all children of the same Mother."

"Be it so; you shall be initiated."

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Even today if our country is to progress, there is no way other than this sort of the Santana pledge, is there?

Though 'Anandamatha' is based on the history of our land not all of it is pure history. In fact there was no institution by name 'Anandamatha'. Bankim Chandra made use of history, but created a number of characters. And he gave a novel, which ennoble the reader. It enables the reader to escape from the petty thoughts of selfishness. It gives unforgettable pictures of men and women who live only for the country. And, in this novel, Bankim Chandra has given us. The people of India, the sacred 'mantra' of Vande Mataram' (Salutations to the Mother!).

Undoubtedly Bankim Chandra's most famous novel is 'Anandamatha.' But he wrote several other novels which delighted the readers. One of them is 'Durgeshanandini'.

Mandaran is a fortress, and Veerendra Simha is its lord - the 'Durgesha'. His daughter Tilottama is the Durgeshanandini. She is the heroin of the book. Jagat Simha is the hero. His father Mana Simha, though a Rajput, is employed in the army of Mughal Emperor Akbar. Jagat Simha happens to see Tilottama near Mandaran. He wishes to marry her. But Veerendra Simha is his enemy. How can he marry his enemy's daughter? Naturally the story is full of obstacles, intrigues and dangers. A new character, 'Ayesha, is introduced. She is ready to sacrifice her happiness for the sake of others. The novel ends with the marriage of Jagat Simha and Tilottama in Mandaran.

'Durgeshanandini' was first published in 1865. It was so popular that it had to be reprinted thirteen times in twenty-eight years.

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As was said earlier, Bankim wrote novels about the people around him. One such novel was 'Vishavriksha'. This was Bankim's first social novel. Govindpur is a village in the district Haripur. Nagendra is the rich landlord of the village.' By chance he meets a young woman named Kundanandini. She is an orphan. Nagendra offers to look after her. He arranges for her marriage with Taracharan. Within three years after the marriage Taracharan dies and Kundanandini is again alone. So Nagendra has to look after her again. Heera, a jealous woman, is a schemer. Because of her, Nagendra, Kundanandini and Suryamukti (Nagendra's wife) - all undergo much suffering. Nagendra's wife dies in despair.

'Vishavriksha' means the poisonous tree. The tree of poison of this novel represents the anger and the desire for comfort found in every man. This tree grows within anybody. If the mind is firm the tree cannot grow there. It grows when the mind is weak. If a man cannot develop strength of mind, if he cannot control desire and anger, he will be unhappy and he will make others unhappy.

Only three of Bankim Chandra's novels have been discussed here. But several of his novels like 'Kapalkundala' and 'Devi Choudhurani' have been very popular.

Bankim Chandra struck a new path in the realm of novels. Until then a novel was generally a cock and bull story, full of unbelievable incidents. 'Durgeshanandini' broke this tradition. It began a new trend. The story by itself was very interesting. At the same time it was about persons like us - good persons and bad persons, short-tempered

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persons and patient persons. Moreover what happened to the characters, who prospered and who suffered was no longer the most important thing to the reader. He began to ask himself: why did this happen this way? Who was right? Who was wrong?' People no longer read novels just to kill time. In addition to entertainment the novels taught people to think objectively.

The other notable contribution by Bankim Chandra is, of course, 'Vande Mataram.' It became the sacred battlecry of freedom fighters. It became such a source of inspiration that the British officers were enraged at the very mention of this. People were sent to prison just because they sung this song.

'Vande Mataram' has an honored place in independent India. It keeps bright in the hearts of the people the ideal of dedication to our country.

Bankim Chandra's novels made him famous. But he has also written excellent books which are not novels. 'Krishna Charitra', 'Dharmatattva' (Philosophy of Religion), 'Devatattva' (Principle of Divinity) and a commentary on 'Srimadbhagavadgeetha' are some of his other books. He wrote articles on Hinduism both in English and in Bengali. He had deeply studied choice books in English. Besides, he had himself grown up in an orthodox Hindu family. Bankim Chandra was an original thinker, too. The 'Krishna Charitra' is a fine work. To most Hindus Krishna is the incarnation of God and so they worship him. But there are many legends and beliefs associated with Krishna which sometimes make one think. 'Does Krishna deserve to be worshipped?' One such belief, for example, is that Krishna had

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sixteen thousand wives. Bankim Chandra had studied the 'Mahabharatha', the 'Harivamsha' and the Puranas which narrate the story of Lord Krishna's life. In his work he examines the accounts contained in each of these books, and what we may accept and what we should reject, and give reasons. According to him there is no higher religion or nobler way of life than that preached by Krishna; Krishna is holiness himself. He was full of compassion and lived only for the sake of justice. He desired nothing for himself. ' Bankim Chandra shows that Krishna is an ascetic even though he lived in the midst of people.

Bankim Chandra worked in the field of journalism too.

Those were the days of few journals. He felt that there was need for a journal offering variety of reading material. The periodical should, of course, publish stories and novels, but it should publish articles on modern science; it should also include articles, which stimulate thinking. So in April 1872 he brought out the first issue of 'Vangadarshan'.

In the very first issue of 'Vangadarshan' Bankim wrote: 'I have no ill feeling towards either English or Englishmen.....It is very good to study English as much as possible.....(but) pure silver is better than gilt brass.....A true Bengali is better than one who poses as an Englishman

Bengal will not progress as long as educated people and scholars do not express themselves in Bengali.'

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Thus one of the aims of Bankim was to interest people in science and in the problems of the progress of their society and their country. It was a time when educated Indians spoke only English instead of their own language. So Bankim Chandra wanted to foster the love of the Bengali language in the educated Bengalis, and to make them share their knowledge with others through their language. This was his second aim.

Rabindranath Tagore has said that 'Vangadarshan' was like the first rains of the month of Ashadh. This month of the Indian calendar falls in June-July. Its first rains bring a new liveliness to nature. 'Vangadarshan' created such a liveliness in Bengal. People eagerly looked forward to its issues. Besides, 'Vangadarshan' made possible the publication of numerous stories, poems, novels, plays and articles of criticism; it also paved the way for later journals.

In any list of good writers of India, Bankim Chandra is bound to find a high place. Most of his writings are in Bengali. But they upheld Indian culture. He wrote excellent books on Hinduism and critically examined its teachings. He offered his own views on necessary social reforms; he explained the mental attitudes necessary for the country's progress. Several people opposed him and many laughed at him. His views on Lord Krishna were resented by orthodox people. But Bankim Chandra did not budge. He courageously continued on his own independent path. Most of the educated people were attracted to the ways and fashions of the English and to the English language. To such people he declared that no man, however highly educated, need be ashamed to use his own language. He declared

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that people could progress only through their own language. We need not hate any language; we ought to use every language to add to our storehouse of knowledge. But if we are to progress there is only one royal road - and that is our own language and no other.

He is one of those who stimulated in Indians the desire for independence. His writings brought home to people the meaning of nationalism. 'Anandamatha' is a magnificent novel of noble patriotism.

Every noble character created by a storyteller or a novelist or a dramatist is his deathless contribution to his country. Bankim Chandra created quite a number of such personalities in his works. He stands out as one of those who shaped literature.

In 'Anandamatha' Bhavananda says, "Our Motherland is our Mother. We have no other mother, no father, no wife, no children, no home and no family; we have only this Sujala, Suphala, Malayajasheetala."

In the same novel Shanthi says to her husband, "My Lord, you are my Guru. Can I teach you your sacred duty? You are a hero. Need I teach you the way of a hero? Let us now chant Vande Mataram'."

Men like Bhavananda and women like Shanthi live for ever in our hearts. It was Bankim Chandra who created such characters. With him let us consecrate these sacred words in our hearts:

Vande Mataram!

Author: *Enke*