

THE SACRED BROTHERHOOD/AMANDAMATH

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (Chatterjee)

(1882)

Story

This is a historical novel set in the late 18th century, almost exactly 100 years before the novel was published. The historical context is that the Mughal Empire has collapsed all over India, but particularly in Bengal where the action takes place. After the Battle of Plassey in 1757, when the British (that is, the army of the East India Company) defeated the Nawab of Bengal and his French allies, local society and economy was in turmoil. Within a few years, a terrible famine hit the Bengal countryside. This is the event with which the novel begins.

Mahendra is a wealthy landowner, who is forced to leave his village and flee to the city in search of food. He and his wife (Kalyani) leave with their young daughter (Sukumari) and set out on a long journey. During this exodus, the couple get separated and Kalyani finds herself, and her young daughter, lost in a forest. She has to flee from thieves, which exhausts her and she falls unconscious by the side of a river. A Hindu monk finds her and her child. This monk is Satyananda, the leader of the Ananda math (monastery), but he is also the leader of an underground revolutionary group opposed to British rule in India. Before he can even help Kalyani, Satyananda is arrested but, as he is being dragged away, manages to alert another man to the plight of Kalyani and her child. This second monk, Jivananda, then manages to take Kalyani and her child to the monastery, which is also the rebel group's hideout. Before long, Mahendra finds them and the family are reunited. We then get Jivananda's backstory: he has married a young orphaned girl named Shanti but left her in order to become a monk; she tracks him down and, despite the reservations of Satyananda, proves herself capable of fighting alongside the rebels.

Under the influence of these ascetic warriors, Mahendra is recruited to the rebel cause. He is taught the secret of the three forms of the goddess Bharat Mata ('Mother India'), whom the rebels worship: 1) an image of what India was 2) an image of what India has become; and 3) an image of what India will become. When Mahendra does not appear to grasp their meaning, a monk sings a song ('Hail Mother [India]'), which would soon become the anthem of the Indian independence movement.

When Mahendra finally responds and appears sympathetic, Satyananda (under orders from a mysterious guru figure who lives in the mountains) tries to persuade him to use his money to manufacture guns so that the monks can fight the British. Satyananda also explains that Indians need to borrow certain scholarly techniques from the Europeans that will enable them to understand the now-forgotten truths of ancient Indian ritual texts.

When the rebel monks grow in numbers and popularity, they are emboldened to stake out a new headquarters in a fort abandoned by the defeated Mughals. Soon, the untrained rebels win a somewhat unlikely victory in a pitched battle with the British by capturing their canons and turning the fire back on enemy lines. The monks have been led by Jivananda, who is accompanied by his wife, Shanti, the only woman in the rebel group. Although Jivananda is badly wounded in the battle, he is nursed back to health by Shanti. In the end, they decide to undertake a pilgrimage and to live as itinerant monks, while Mahendra and Kalyani decide to set up a new home. Mahendra, however, continues to support the rebels with clandestine material aid. Not surprisingly, this dramatic novel, combining revolution and religion, was banned by the British until they left in 1947.

Themes

Anti-British The novel is one of the earliest literary expressions of Indian patriotism (that word seems more appropriate than 'nationalism', which only became popular toward the end of the

nineteenth century). This early patriotism has two distinct, but interrelated strands. The first is anti-British. For more than a century, the British, or more correctly, the East India Company, had been expanding its economic power in Bengal, using the port of Calcutta as an entry point. As the preeminent trading nation in the 18th century, they were able to use local merchants and landed elites to take over key commodities. To protect their trade, they hired an army of sepoys (Indian soldiers commanded by British officers). By the 1770s, when the novel is set, they had conquered the whole of Bengal, reducing the Nawab of Bengal to a mere puppet. Realising that the British meant to stay, the sacred brotherhood of the Ananda monastery take an oath to renounce all worldly ties until they are successful in their campaign to drive the British from their land. These rebellious holy men (who are based on real historical figures in late-18th century Bengal known as the 'rebel sannyasis') are considered by some to be the first wave of patriots in India's long fight for Independence. They worship a goddess called 'Mother India,' and they sing a song (written by Chatterjee) in worship of India that became the anthem for nationalists and was sung by millions during Gandhi's campaign. Similarly, Chatterjee's fictional Ananda monastery was the inspiration for Swami Vivekananda, the great spiritual leader of Indian nationalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Anti-Muslim The novel also has a second strand of patriotism, which is directed against the Muslim rulers of Bengal. Although they had been defeated nearly two decades before the novel begins, Muslim landlords were kept in place as tax collectors for the British authorities. The author makes it clear that it was their rapacious taxation scheme that impoverished the countryside and caused the famine, which is the reason that Mahendra and his family leave their village and end up in the Ananda monastery. Muslims, the novel suggests, are responsible not only for a catastrophic economic collapse but also for a long cultural decline. Muslim rulers and elites, it is hinted by the author, oversaw the loss of royal patronage to Brahmins and temples, which contributed to the gradual erosion of Hindu practices and values. As the author himself comments, 'Many had resented the end of Hindu power and Hindus had been eager for the restoration of their faith.'

Women A third, and less prominent, theme is the empowerment of women. This theme is most explicitly illustrated by the identification of India as a woman in the famous song 'Vande Mataram' or 'Hail Mother [India]'. But it is also embodied more dramatically in the character of Shanti. At first, as an orphan girl, she appears to be weak and vulnerable. However, as the novel progresses so, too, does she gain in strength. When her husband, Jivananda leaves her (or 'renounces' her, as he says) and joins the Ananda monastery, she does not accept the separation. She trains herself to become physically strong and then demands that she, an unknown young woman, be allowed to join the ranks of the rebel monks (not for political reasons but only to be with her husband). She undergoes various tests, including stretching a steel bow, which she passes to the amazement of the watching brotherhood. She is accepted and fights alongside the men in the battle against the British, distinguishing herself for bravery. She also has the healing power to revive her dying husband at the end of the story.

Characters

Mahendra Mahendra is the wealthy landowner (*zamindar*), who lives with his wife (Kalyani) and daughter (Sukumari). After they flee from famine, he becomes a monk in the Ananda monastery (*math*) under the tutelage of Satyananda. Mahendra contributes money to buy arms to support the rebel monks in their battle with the British.

Satyananda Satyananda is the leader of the monks at the Ananda monastery, a group of holy men who have taken up violence to fight against the British. Satyananda himself takes orders from a mysterious guru figure and passes them on to his brother monks. In the end, he goes with the guru to the mountains.

Jivananda Jivananda is Satyananda's right-hand man. Both intelligent and brave, he rescues Mahendra's wife and daughter and then reunites them with Mahendra. In the bloody battle with the British, he fights courageously, defending a bridge but is badly injured. He is nursed back to health by his wife, Shanti, a female warrior, and the two of them become wandering ascetics.

Shanti Shanti is an orphan who is nevertheless educated and physically strong. She marries Jivananda, who then leaves her to become a monk at the Ananda monastery, but Shanti joins the

rebel group as a warrior herself and fight in the battle. After reviving her husband's seemingly dead body, the couple begin a life as itinerant renunciators.

Mahendra (Loyal)

Character At the beginning of the novel, Mahendra appears as a weak victim of circumstances, who is forced by the exigencies of weather and fluctuating commodity prices to leave his ancestral village. He is a cautious man, protective of his wife and daughter and uninterested in politics. Slowly, however, he changes his ideas and joins the brotherhood of revolutionary monks, takes an oath of renunciation and commits himself to the violent overthrow of the British colonial government. Even as he changes, though, he does not act impulsively. Rather he thinks about the pros and cons, and only then takes a clear decision. In this respect, he is less decisive and possess less authority than the other leading monks, although he does show courage during battle. He is also a loving husband, despondent when his wife dies and joyous when she is revived and he is finally reunited with his young daughter. The single characteristic that runs through all these episodes is his loyalty, to his wife, to his daughter, to the leader of the monks and to his country.

Activities Having fled from famine with his family, Mahendra has no regular routine. The only repeated pattern is that he gets lost or is captured and then rescued. We discover, however, that he has a good voice and likes to sing. After he joins the rebel group of monks, Mahendra devotes himself to furthering their cause by helping to build a fort and to manufacture arms. In the final battle, he leads a column of rebel soldiers on horseback.

Illustrative moments

Passive One strand of Mahendra's character is passivity. This is clearly illustrated when we first encounter Mahendra, in the opening pages. Severe drought and famine have ravaged his land, several of his family members, including his own children, have died of disease bred by malnutrition. His first words are: 'How long can we go on like this?' Despite the fact that he is, or was, very rich, he is unable to control the conditions of his life. It is a humiliating situation, from which he can find no way of escape. Except to flee. Even on his flight to an unknown town, he appears powerless. He loses contact with his wife when he, against her advice, wanders away to look for food. Now alone, he is beaten by soldiers and captured by a gang of thieves, who tie him to the underside of a bullock cart. This is how the scene ends, with Mahendra, having left his village and lost his wife, literally unable to move.

Patriotic Mahendra's passivity is transformed in passionate patriotism when he meets the monks of the Ananda monastery. This change is gradual, but the key moment occurs when he has a conversation with a monk called Bhavananda, who has rescued him from the thieves. They are sitting by a river bank, and Mahendra is lost in thought when the monk begins to sing a song in order to stir him into conversation. That song is the famous 'Vande Mataram' ('Hail, Mother [India]'). But when Mahendra first hears it by the river, he is perplexed. 'Who is this mother?' he asks. In reply, the monk sings the same song again, and now Mahendra has his big moment of realisation. 'It is the country,' he cries. 'It is India, not a mortal mother, but our motherland.' This is the breakthrough, the point at which Mahendra the victim begins to change into Mahendra the patriot.

Revolutionary The evolution of Mahendra from a passive victim to an active patriot continues later in the novel when he becomes a true revolutionary. This means that he has taken the vow to renounce the world and his family until the British have been defeated. Mahendra takes the oath and then he has a conversation with Satyananda, the leader of the revolutionary monks. He is asked a number of questions and gives satisfactory answers, but then Satyananda asks how he can best support the cause. Mahendra hesitates for a moment and then replies that he has material assets, money and men, back in his ancestral village. Satyananda then orders Mahendra to go back and to build him a fort, with proper fortifications, and to manufacture guns and ammunition (how is not specified). Mahendra accepts immediately, and now there is no turning back. He will no longer be simply a patriot, a supporter of the idea of independence. He will become an advocate of a violent overthrow of the government, and he will therefore become guilty, in the eyes of the law, of sedition. The authorities will hunt for him and attempt to put him in prison. But Mahendra, knowing the risks, does not flinch from what he understands is his sacred duty.

Satyananda (Powerful)

Character Satyananda is an ascetic, a man who has renounced the domestic life for the life of a wandering holy man. Unlike most ascetics, however, he has taken an oath to drive the British from India (by any means necessary) and to return the country to Hindu traditions. Perhaps as befits the leader of a secret group of revolutionary monks, Satyananda is a little mysterious. We learn almost nothing of his background or even of his family. We know he himself has a guru, hidden in the mountains, from whom he takes orders. Although Satyananda is an old man, who describes himself as 'a frail old carcass', he possesses power as a result of his spiritual training. This makes him calm and patient. When the rebel monks lose the first battle, he is unworried: 'In war,' he says, 'you lose battles and you win battles. The important thing is not to lose heart.' The only time he shows anger, or any strong emotion, is when his subordinates plan to make him king of Bengal and he is forced to remind them that he and they are ascetics. Despite being a spiritual man, he is very pragmatic. He knows exactly how many British soldiers are in his country and how many canons they have; from that precise information, he calculates exactly how many men and arms he needs. He is sharp-minded in all his activities, whether in meditation or in battle.

Activities Satyananda is the leader of the monastery, which like any organisation requires direction and authority. As a result, he spends time teaching and consoling and disciplining the other monks. He gives discourses and he leads the monks in religious singing. At other times, he meditates by himself and prays to the images of the goddess (representing India) in the monastery. More than once, he disappears altogether, and it is said that he has gone to the mountains to receive instructions from his guru there.

Illustrative moments

Powerful As the leader of the rebel ascetics, and as the result of years of prayer and penance, Satyananda possesses unusual powers. Fortunately, he chooses to use these powers in the service of liberating his country from both British political rule and Muslim cultural domination. A good illustration of this power comes in a scene when he and Mahendra have been captured by sepoys (Indian soldiers in the East India Company's army) and thrown in a dark prison. Mahendra is in despair, thinking that his wife and daughter might be dead. He hardly knows who his fellow prisoner, this monk who calls himself Satyananda, really is. Then Satyananda says to him, 'I know you doubt me. And I understand. But now you must trust me. You must do as I say and you will be free.' Mahendra is doubtful but he has no choice, if he wants to escape, so he follows the monk's orders. He goes to the locked door and utters a name, and within a minute a man enters and sets him free.

Renunciant Satyananda is a sincere ascetic, a man who has renounced all sensual pleasure and material desires. He and the other monks have taken up arms only in order to restore the motherland to its rightful rulers, the people of India. This, however, presents a paradox: in order to achieve their goal, Satyananda must act like a man who desires power, who conquers land and who will establish himself in authority. This underlying tension, and his true asceticism, is brought out in a scene, which occurs right after the monks' initial victory brings them the control of a small area of Bengal. He is talking with the other leading monks about what should be the next step in their campaign. He explains that they must raise a larger army and conquer more territory. 'Yes,' one of his lieutenants says in agreement, 'we will sweep the countryside and then establish you on your throne.' At this idea, that he would become a sort of king, Satyananda flies into a rage, for the first time in his life. 'None of us is king,' he declares, his eyes shining with purpose. 'We are ascetics.'

Compassionate Satyananda is intent on driving out the British, at any cost, but he never condones wanton violence. This is important because at the time, both in history and in the novel, there were marauding gangs of renegade ascetics who took advantage of the lawlessness that followed the collapse of the Mughal Empire. They often set fire to Muslim houses and stole whatever valuable they could find. In one key scene, Satyananda condemns such violence and innocent suffering. He is having a strategy meeting with his lieutenants, trying to plan their next attack, when one of monks begins a tirade against Muslims. 'Our faith is ruined,' he says to the group. 'Our caste and honour are gone, now even our lives are in danger...unless we drive out these drunken Muslim wretches, how can we save the religion of Hindus?' Before the others can agree, Satyananda silences them with a penetrating stare and then strong words about the need to be disciplined and not to harm anyone but

their enemy, the British. Satyananda is not a prototype of Gandhi—he did endorse violence, but only when directed against clear adversaries, such as British soldiers and officers.

Shanti (Selfless)

Character Shanti is a major character in this novel celebrating the patriotism of rebel monks in late-18th century Bengal. She is from a Brahmin family but becomes an orphan at an early age. From the beginning, however, it is clear that this young female is not a delicate flower, but a powerful engine. Even after she marries, she does not dress or act like a woman. Shanti is determined to be physically strong and does strenuous exercise to be able to defend herself. She is also a clever, as well as a loving, person. When her husband leaves her (to join the monastery), she devises a way to enter the brotherhood and join him. She is also courageous, as illustrated when she saves Kalyani (Mahendra's wife) from thieves in the forest. In addition, she is capable of gathering important intelligence from the British forces that the monks are preparing to attack. On one level, she is the embodiment of 'Mother India,' but the author also endows her character with complexity so that we sympathise with her struggles to find her husband and to prove herself in a man's world.

Activities Shanti is married at a young age (although she doesn't actually live with her husband until later) and likes to play in the fields and forests. Unlike other girls, however, she prefers climbing trees with the boys, and she scandalises the village by riding on a horse in a sari. Later, she undertakes a strict regime of physical exercise to build up her strength. Once she has been recruited into the ranks of the rebel monks, she acts mostly as a spy, wearing disguises, going behind enemy lines, making friends with British officers and bringing back valuable information. In battle, she fights alongside the men and with great courage.

Illustrative moments

Strong Shanti's physical strength is a crucial part of her character. It is what enables her to join the monastery and be reunited with her husband. She displays her strength at various points, for example, when she fights off the sexual advances of a Brahmin pundit and leaves him 'senseless on the ground.' But a more dramatic and consequential illustration occurs later, when Shanti has arrived at the monastery and asks to be admitted into the 'brotherhood.' Satyananda is hesitant, looking at the young woman, whose false beard (her disguise) he has just removed. 'Can strength not reside in a woman's arms?' she asks. In reply, he makes her face a test to string a bow made of steel. When she easily bends the bow and fits the string, Satyananda is amazed. Only four people have ever passed this test! 'How come you have such strength?' he asks. 'Because I have lived a life of purity,' is Shanti's answer. This is the key to understanding not only her character but the novel as whole. Power lies in purity.

Selfless The great virtue extolled throughout this novel is the power, and the pain, of self-sacrifice. The monks have renounced their families in order to take up the fight against the British, but what of the wives they have left behind? Their plight is dramatised by Shanti's suffering. When she married Jivananda, she did not know that he would join the Ananda monastery and would only return if the monks were successful in defeating the British. Now, with her husband a monk, she, too, must suppress her love for him, her desire to be with him, in order that she supports his cause. This sacrifice is shown in a scene, when Jivananda briefly comes back to visit Shanti. When he sees her, his own resolve weakens, and he feels that he will not go back to the monastery, but Shanti will not allow him to break his vow. Although she desperately wants him to stay, she also knows that he would hate himself if he did not return. With tears in her eyes, she says to him, 'No, my love, you must return. Do not forsake your duty as a warrior for my sake. My pleasure is to see you fulfil your vow.' There could be no greater example of self-sacrifice than a person who renounces her own happiness so that another may achieve their goal.

Intelligent Shanti proves valuable to the rebel monks' cause by her cunning as well as her physical strength. In one memorable scene, she goes out in the disguise of a beggar with the intention of meeting the British army officers and finding out their battle plans. She approaches the army camp and says she herself has information to give the Major about the whereabouts of the rebel monks. Taken in by her disguise and her fake information, the Major unwittingly reveals certain details about his own soldiers' movements and strategy. When she communicates this intelligence back to Satyananda, it turns out to be decisive in the victory that the monks gain over the British army. Some

critics have likened Shanti to an Indian version of Mata Hari.