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Vande Mataram — 150 Years of the Song That Shaped India's Freedom Movement (1876–2026)

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SUBJECTS COVERED**HISTORY & CULTURE****POLITY****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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WHY IN NEWS

The 77th Republic Day (January 26, 2026) chose “150 Years of Vande Mataram” as its theme, marking a century and a half since Bankim Chandra Chatterjee composed the song in 1876. The theme links India’s independence movement anthem to the modern republic’s journey under Aatmanirbhar Bharat.

THE COMPOSITION — 1876

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (Chattopadhyay) — novelist, poet, and deputy magistrate under the British administration — composed Vande Mataram in **1876** in **Bengali and Sanskrit**.

Literal meaning: *Vande Mataram* = “I worship/salute you, O Mother” — addressing Bharat Mata (Mother India) as a goddess-like figure.

The song in context:

Written during a period of growing anti-colonial sentiment in Bengal under British rule

Chatterjee was deeply influenced by the **Swadeshi sentiment** and Hindu philosophical traditions

The song personifies India as a mother — first as a natural landscape (rivers, mountains, forests) and then with devotional attributes drawn from Hindu iconography (Durga, Lakshmi)

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838–1894):

Born: June 27, 1838 in Kantalpara, Bengal

Education: First graduate of Calcutta University (1858)

Career: Indian Civil Service — Deputy Magistrate (served British administration while writing subversive patriotic literature)

Major works: *Durgeshnandini* (1865, first Bengali novel), *Kapalkundala*, *Bishabriksha*, *Anandmath* (1882), *Devi Chaudhurani*, *Sitaram*

Founded literary journal: *Bangadarshan* (1872)

Tagline associated with him: “Ananda” (Joy) — his pen name was associated with literary renaissance of Bengal

THE NOVEL — ANANDMATH (1882)

Vande Mataram was published as part of Bankim’s novel **Anandmath** (1882) — a Bengali novel set during the **Sannyasi Rebellion** (1763–1800) in Bengal, when Hindu monks (sannyasis) revolted against both the Nawab’s forces and the British East India Company.

The Sannyasi Rebellion:

A series of armed raids and uprisings in Bengal and Bihar (1763–1800)

Led by armed ascetics (sannyasis and fakirs) initially opposing the famine-induced taxation

Considered by some historians as a precursor to the organised independence movement

Warren Hastings sent British troops to suppress the rebellion

Anandmath’s message: The novel’s central theme: *“The land of Mother India must be freed from foreign domination.”* The sannyasi protagonists adopt Vande Mataram as their battle hymn before engaging in armed resistance. Chatterjee used the novel as an allegory for British rule — thinly veiled as Muslim Nawab rule in the narrative.

Controversy about the novel: Anandmath was viewed with suspicion by some Muslim communities because the villains in the narrative were portrayed as Muslim rulers, and the heroes as Hindu monks fighting for Bharat Mata (conceptualised through Hindu iconography). This has remained a source of historical debate about the song’s sectarian dimensions.

THE INC CONNECTION — 1896

Vande Mataram was first sung publicly at the **Indian National Congress session in 1896** — by none other than **Rabindranath Tagore**.

Why this was significant: The INC was a secular political platform bringing together Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, and Christians against British rule. By adopting Vande Mataram as the movement’s song (even informally), the INC embedded it into the consciousness of the independence struggle across communities.

Subsequent spread:

The **Partition of Bengal (1905)** by Viceroy Lord Curzon → triggered the **Swadeshi Movement** → Vande Mataram became the defining anthem of the movement

Sung at mass protests, processions, and political meetings across Bengal and beyond

Bal Gangadhar Tilak used it extensively in Maharashtra’s Swadeshi campaigns

Lala Lajpat Rai in Punjab; **Bipin Chandra Pal** in Bengal — the Lal-Bal-Pal triumvirate — championed it as a movement anthem

THE CONSTITUTIONAL DEBATE — NATIONAL ANTHEM VS NATIONAL SONG

When the Constituent Assembly was deliberating on India’s national symbols, a debate arose:

Jana Gana Mana vs Vande Mataram:

Dimension	Jana Gana Mana	Vande Mataram
Author	Rabindranath Tagore	Bankim Chandra Chatterjee
Language	Bengali/Sanskrit	Bengali/Sanskrit
Composition	1911	1876
First sung at INC	1911 (Calcutta Session)	1896 (unnamed session)
Adopted as National Anthem	January 24, 1950	—
Status	National Anthem (constitutional)	National Song (honorary, not constitutional)
Playing time	~52 seconds (full)	Variable

Why Vande Mataram was not made the National Anthem: Jawaharlal Nehru and the Constituent Assembly majority took the position that Jana Gana Mana was the more inclusive choice because:

Its lyrics addressed all communities of India without religious specificity

Vande Mataram’s original full text (all stanzas) contained goddess imagery that some Muslim members of the Constituent Assembly found uncomfortable as a compulsory national symbol

The compromise: Only the **first two stanzas** of Vande Mataram would be used as the national song — these stanzas address India as a natural landscape (rivers, mountains) without explicit religious iconography

National Song status: Vande Mataram has **no constitutional backing** as a compulsory song. It is an honorary national song — courts have held that citizens cannot be forced to sing it (unlike the national anthem, where public buildings/places typically play it). The Supreme Court has upheld it as a song of national importance but not constitutional obligation.

THE VANDE MATARAM CONTROVERSY

The controversy over Vande Mataram has recurred in multiple forms:

1. Religious objection: The complete text of the song invokes Durga explicitly. Some Muslim scholars and political leaders have argued it contradicts Islamic principles to sing praise to a goddess figure — even if that figure is “Mother India.”

Response: INC leaders including Mahatma Gandhi argued the first two stanzas (the ones used) are free of idol-worship elements and are simply patriotic.

2. Court orders on compulsory singing:

In 1998 and 2000, some states attempted to make singing Vande Mataram mandatory in schools. Courts have consistently held that **compulsory singing violates freedom of conscience** (Article 25)

The **Madras High Court (2003)** ruled: Vande Mataram must be honoured and respected, but no citizen can be forced to sing it against their religious beliefs

3. BJP-Congress political divide:

The BJP and RSS have long championed Vande Mataram as the de facto national anthem and have pressed for mandatory observance

Congress has typically taken the position that it is an honoured national song, not a constitutional obligation

150 YEARS: 1876–2026

The 2026 Republic Day theme bridges this long arc:

- 1876:** Composition — colonial Bengal, growing anti-British consciousness
- 1896:** First INC performance — national movement symbol
- 1905:** Swadeshi anthem — mass mobilisation
- 1947:** Independence — sung at midnight celebrations
- 1950:** Honorary national song — Republic Day
- 2026:** 150 years — theme of 77th Republic Day parade under Aatmanirbhar Bharat

UPSC RELEVANCE

Vande Mataram composed **1876** (Bankim Chandra Chatterjee); published in *Anandmath* **1882** (Sannyasi Rebellion); first sung at INC: **1896** (by Rabindranath Tagore); Partition of Bengal: **1905** (Lord Curzon; Swadeshi Movement triggered); National Anthem: *Jana Gana Mana* (Tagore; composed **1911**; National Anthem January 24, 1950); National Song: *Vande Mataram* (honorary, not constitutional); Swadeshi Movement leaders: Lal-Bal-Pal (Lajpat Rai, Tilak, Pal); Article 25 — freedom of conscience; National Song not compulsory by courts.

Bengal literary renaissance (Bankim Chandra, Tagore); *Swadeshi Movement* (1905–1908) — causes, leaders, methods, impact; national symbols and Constituent Assembly debates; Hindu–Muslim unity and division in the freedom movement — *Vande Mataram* as a case study. **GS-2:** Freedom of religion (Article 25) vs national symbols; compulsory recitation controversies; federalism and state orders mandating song-singing.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

VANDE MATARAM — KEY FACTS:

Composed by: **Bankim Chandra Chatterjee** (Chattopadhyay)
 Year of composition: **1876**
 Language: Bengali and Sanskrit
 Published in: Novel **Anandmath** (1882)
 Novel setting: Sannyasi Rebellion (Bengal/Bihar, **1763–1800**)
 First public singing: **1896** INC session, by **Rabindranath Tagore**
 Republic Day 2026 theme: “**150 Years of Vande Mataram**” (1876–2026)
 Status: **National Song** (honorary) — NOT National Anthem
 Only first **two stanzas** used as national song

BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTERJEE:

Born: **1838** | Died: **1894**
 First graduate of **Calcutta University** (1858)
 Journal: *Bangadarshan* (1872)
 Other novels: Durgeshnandini (1865, first Bengali novel), Kapalkukundala, Anandmath

NATIONAL ANTHEM VS NATIONAL SONG:

National Anthem: Jana Gana Mana (Rabindranath Tagore; composed **1911**; first sung 1911 INC Calcutta session; adopted January 24, **1950**)
National Song: Vande Mataram (Bankim Chandra; **1876/1882**; honorary, not constitutional; not compulsory per courts)

SWADESHI MOVEMENT (1905–1908):

Trigger: **Partition of Bengal** by Lord Curzon (**1905**)
 Leaders: **Lal** (Lala Lajpat Rai) + **Bal** (Bal Gangadhar Tilak) + **Pal** (Bipin Chandra Pal)
 Methods: Boycott of British goods; promotion of Indian manufactures; national education; public meetings
 Vande Mataram: Swadeshi anthem; sung at mass gatherings

KEY CONSTITUTIONAL ARTICLES:

Article 25: Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice, propagation of religion
 No constitutional article mandates singing National Song (unlike national anthem observance)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Anandmath plot: Sannyasi rebels fighting against both British and Nawab forces in Bengal
 Goddess imagery: Vande Mataram full text invokes Durga; source of religious controversy
 Bhikaji Cama unfurled first Indian flag at Stuttgart International Congress, Germany, **1907** — during Swadeshi era
 Partition of Bengal (1905): Divided Bengal into East Bengal (Muslim majority, capital Dacca) + West Bengal (Hindu majority, capital Calcutta); reversed by Lord Hardinge 1911 (Delhi Durbar)

Sources: National Archives of India, Sahitya Akademi, The Hindu

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