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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The National Song Question — Vande Mataram, Identity, and India's Plural Democracy

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SUBJECTS COVERED**HISTORY & CULTURE****POLITY****SOCIAL ISSUES****GS PAPERS****GS1****GS2****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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GS1

GS2



The Hindu

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 1

GS Paper 2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

""The Republic Day 2026 theme '150 Years of Vande Mataram' revisits the old question of national symbols in a plural democracy. Should Vande Mataram be made constitutionally mandatory? How do you balance national sentiment with the right to freedom of conscience?""

WHY IN NEWS

The theme of India's 77th Republic Day — "150 Years of Vande Mataram" — has revived discussion about the national song's status, its historical significance, and the unresolved tension between national symbols and the constitutional right to freedom of conscience in a plural democracy.

THE SONG THAT DIVIDED AS IT UNITED

There is a paradox at the heart of Vande Mataram's history: the song that became the anthem of India's freedom struggle also became a fault line in the politics of national identity. That paradox is not accidental — it reflects something deeper about India's pluralism.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee composed Vande Mataram in 1876, in the full flowering of Bengal's cultural renaissance — a period when Hindu philosophical and literary traditions were being rediscovered, reinterpreted, and weaponised against colonial domination. The song personifies India as both a natural landscape and a divine mother — drawing on iconography from the Durga tradition, making it, for its author, not a religious composition but a national one, in an era when the nation-state was being imagined through available cultural idioms.

The problem was that not every Indian shared those idioms.

THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY'S WISDOM

The Constituent Assembly's debate over Vande Mataram versus Jana Gana Mana as the national anthem was one of its finest moments — a demonstration that the founders understood the difference between majority preference and constitutional obligation.

Jawaharlal Nehru made the case clearly: a national anthem, unlike a patriotic song, must be capable of being sung by every citizen without reservation. Jana Gana Mana — Tagore's composition, first sung at the 1911 INC session — addressed India's people, its rivers, its mountains, and its history as a collective whole, without invoking any deity. It was, in the Assembly's judgment, the more constitutionally appropriate choice.

But the Assembly did not discard Vande Mataram. It gave it the status of national song — an honour, not an obligation. Only the first two stanzas, free of explicit goddess imagery, were adopted. The compromise was characteristically Indian: inclusive by design, not by erasure.

THE RECURRING COMPULSION DEMAND

Every few years, the demand resurfaces: make Vande Mataram compulsory — in schools, government offices, Parliament, public spaces. The political logic is understandable. The song is beautiful; it carries a century and a half of freedom movement memory; it ought to be respected.

But the legal and constitutional logic cuts the other way.

Article 25 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience — the right to hold religious beliefs privately and to refuse religious expressions that conflict with them. Courts have consistently held that compelling citizens to sing Vande Mataram — given its religious associations for many — is a violation of Article 25. The Madras High Court (2003) and several other courts have drawn this line clearly.

The deeper democratic point: **national unity is not produced by compelling uniform expression of sentiment**. It is produced by the lived experience of justice, dignity, and belonging. A national anthem sung out of compulsion, under fear of social or legal sanction, does not build the attachment it claims to foster. It breeds resentment.

THE 150-YEAR LENS

Looking back 150 years, Vande Mataram's trajectory tells us something important about how national symbols live in democratic cultures.

The song was not born as a state instrument — it was born as an insurgent cry against state power. Bankim's sannyasis singing *Vande Mataram* as they went into battle against the British is a very different image from the song being enforced by the state against its own citizens.

When Bal Gangadhar Tilak wove it into the Swadeshi Movement’s mass mobilisations — it worked because people chose to sing it, because it gave voice to a fury and a longing that needed expression. The song’s power was in its voluntary adoption.

Democratic national symbols derive their power from consent, not coercion.

THE INCLUSIVE PATH FORWARD

The Republic Day theme’s appropriateness lies not in using the anniversary to press for compulsion but in using it for education and reflection. What does it mean to celebrate 150 years of a song whose composition preceded the Indian nation-state by 74 years? What does it tell us about the long prehistory of national consciousness in India?

These are rich, democratically generative questions. The answers will deepen attachment to Vande Mataram far more than any court order could.

A song that survived colonial repression, independence debates, Partition trauma, and seven decades of republic deserves to be honoured — with the freedom that it helped win.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Vande Mataram: composed 1876 (Bankim Chandra); Anandmath (1882); first INC 1896 (Tagore); National Song (not constitutional); Articles 25 (conscience), 51A; Jana Gana Mana: National Anthem (Tagore; 1911; adopted January 24, 1950); Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971.

*Bengal cultural renaissance; Swadeshi Movement (1905-08); role of songs/symbols in national movements; Bankim Chandra and Tagore in Indian literary tradition. **GS-2:** Article 25 — freedom of conscience; rights of minorities; pluralism in India’s constitutional design; national symbols and their democratic legitimacy; Constituent Assembly debates.*

★ **FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA**

VANDE MATARAM — LEGAL/CONSTITUTIONAL STATUS:

National Song: **Honorary**, no constitutional provision mandates it

National Anthem (Jana Gana Mana): Constitutionally backed; disrespect = offence

Article 51A(a): Abide by Constitution + respect national flag + **national anthem** (not national song)

Article 25: Freedom of conscience — courts use this to protect those who decline to sing

Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971: Covers National Anthem + National Flag (not National Song)

MADRAS HC 2003: VANDE MATARAM MUST BE RESPECTED BUT CANNOT BE COMPELLED — FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

NATIONAL SYMBOLS — QUICK REFERENCE:

National Anthem: Jana Gana Mana (Tagore, 1911; adopted **January 24, 1950**)

National Song: Vande Mataram (Bankim, 1876; honorary)

National Flag: Tricolour with Ashoka Chakra (adopted July 22, **1947**)

National Emblem: Lion Capital of Ashoka (Sarnath; adopted January 26, **1950**)

National Calendar: Saka Calendar (adopted **1957**)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Constituent Assembly adopted Jana Gana Mana as national anthem on **January 24, 1950** — two days before Constitution came into force (January 26, 1950)

The Drafting Committee of CA: B.R. Ambedkar (Chairman) — Constitution completed November 26, 1949

Article 25: “Subject to public order, morality and health... all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion”

Sources: The Hindu, Lok Sabha Secretariat, Sahitya Akademi

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