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The Role of Language and Literature in Indian Nationalism: From Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay to Rabindranath Tagore

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ABSTRACT

This article illuminates the contribution of language and literature in the process of constructing Indian nationalism, from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novels to Rabindranath Tagore, revealing how these literary figures harnessed language as a weapon for cultural renaissance, political resistance and national identity formation in colonial India; Anandamath (1882), Bankim Chattopadhyay's iconic novel depicting Sannyasi Rebellion and the composer of the patriotic song Vande Mataram personified the image of India as a mother goddess, saturated with divine patriotism and inspiration for the anti-colonial independence sentiments of the mass; via his literary magazine Bangadarshan (begun 1872), Bankim bridged the gap between the educated and uneducated classes, representing one Bengali identity and promoting nationalist consciousness; echoing Bankim's vision, Rabindranath Tagore contributed to furthering this cultural nationalism in diverse domains including poetry, music and visual arts, advocating a humanistic and inclusive identity of nationhood; in his novel Gora (1910), Rabindranath Tagore expounded the issues of identity, religion and nationalism, and delineated the complex relationship with self-discovery and the intersection of the personal and national identity; as both writers employed the Bengali language not in the service of mere communication but as mode of cultural expression and political ideology, competing against colonial narratives in asserting indigenous identity; their works engendered Bengali Renaissance and played a significant role in pushing the Indian independence movement further which demonstrated how language and literature contributed to the myth of nationalism formation; this study underlines the enduring influence of Bankim and Tagore in the realm of literary nationalism, illustrating how their literary endeavors transcend artistic contributions to become the weapons of socio-political change, thus confirming the inseparable connection between language, literature and the nationalist discourse in colonial India.

Keywords: Indian Nationalism, Language and Literature, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Cultural Nationalism, Colonial India

Introduction

The anthropological imperative of language and literature in the evolution and expression of nationalism in India is best underscored when we examine the contribution of two legendary figures Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore— and their works as a veritable instrument of expression of anti-colonial sentiment, national identity, and cultural renaissance under the British yoke, by utilizing the medium of literature to consolidate a sense of unity among an equally diverse Indians, with Bankim's patriotic songs, such as his Vande Mataram, transforming the 'Mother India' into a symbol of resistance against colonial oppression, and his novel Anandamath (1882), encapsulating the ideology of Hindu nationalism that reverberated with the larger freedom movement; whilst Bankim's literary contributions laid the intellectual foundation for Indian nationalism, it was Tagore's more subtle, philosophical, and inclusive approach that further engaged with the discourse, as Tagore utilized his poetry, novels, and verses to weave a narrative of cultural harmony, spiritual nationalism, and a conception of India that eclipsed both sectarianism and communalism, reflected best in works such as Gora (1910), where he delves into the complexity of identity, both individual and national, in the context of British colonialism, and his song "Jana Gana Mana," penned in 1911, an offering that would later become India's national anthem, a symbolic presentation of his vision of an inclusive and unifying national identity; with their innovative use of Bengali language and literature, Bankim and Tagore offered an alternative to the British models of education, and bottom-lined a literary nationalism that was intertwined with the socio-political mobilization of the Indian masses, as their writings not only eulogised India's ancient cultural wealth but critiqued the British imperialism and its obliteration of indigenous traditions, making literature a weapon of resistance and empowerment; moreover, beside the literary and political import of their works, the two writers foregrounded the importance of vernacular languages in shaping the national consciousness, with Bankim advocating for the use of Bengali as a badge of cultural esteem and Tagore raising the stakes by adopting multiple languages, including Bengali, Sanskrit, and English as agents of national resuscitation and global engagement, and in so doing, their works collectively laid the foundation for the birth of a new Indian identity, woven out of a pride in one's own ancestry, but open to modern global influences, and underscored the dynamic play of ideas within tradition and modernity; their literary nationalism not only played a critical role in the evolution of Indian political thought, but their vision of culture and language continued to inform the thinking in the ages to come, inveigling the leading lights like Mahatma Gandhi to espouse the gospel of non-violent resistance and cultural rejuvenation, and Jawaharlal Nehru to spotlight the unity of India's linguistic and cultural diversity in his remodeling of a modern, post-colonial nation; and so, revisiting the works of Bankim Chandra

Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore seeks to unravel how literature and language served not just as tools for political endeavour, but as conduits for building a collective national identity, rooted in tradition but dynamically receptive to the challenges of British colonialism and modernity, with a thrust on how these writers utilized their literary apparatus to fetishize the discourse around nationalism, language, and identity in manners that transcended the literary precincts and had a far-reaching and a lasting impact on the Indian independence movement, and deepens the comprehension of literature's role in the political and cultural rejuvenation of India through its pitch on the language, cultural honor, and anti-colonial resistance, and the import of these writers in the bigger narrative of Indian nationalism and global cultural movements; while illustrating how the works of these towering figures spanned the pole between the elite and the masses, with Tagore's integration of the folk traditions and his appeal to the universal humanism offering an impression of inclusive Indian nationalism that was reflective of the diversity in the Indian society that was, and is, still today.

Review of relevant literature related to the study

Across recent historiography, Indian nationalism emerges as a profoundly linguistic-literary project in which colonial policy, vernacular print publics, and iconic texts together fashioned political community, with scholars showing how nineteenth-century "vernacularization" in administration and schooling (from the Wood's Despatch to provincial language reforms) produced discrete linguistic territories, standardized idioms, and reading publics that intertwined language choice with claims to modernity and sovereignty, a dynamic mapped in Pritipuspa Mishra's study of Odisha as well as wider work on South Asian language ideologies that urges us to look beyond the English-vernacular binary and its hierarchical baggage; within this landscape, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* (1882) and the Sanskritised-Bengali hymn "Vande Mataram" helped encode the nation as deified motherland, a visual-affective repertoire consolidated in *Bharat Mata* iconography, even as later criticism tracks how this idiom could fold religious majoritarianism into patriotic feeling and become politically contentious; counterpointing Bankim's sacralized nationalism, Rabindranath Tagore's fiction and essays—*Ghare Baire* (1916), *Chaar Adhyaya* (1934), and "Nationalism in India" (1917)—offered a humanist, cosmopolitan critique of aggressive nationalism, warning that mechanical nation-state logic and coercive *swadeshi* could erode ethical relations (*samaj*) and women's agency, a position recent political theory recuperates as a modern, secular alternative rather than quietist retreat; yet Tagore's cultural authority also fed inclusive national symbolism—his "Jana Gana Mana," first sung at the Indian National Congress in December 1911, was adopted in January 1950 as the national anthem while the Constituent Assembly simultaneously accorded "Vande Mataram" equal honor as the national song—illustrating how Indian nationalism institutionalized both pluralist and devotional strands of literary nation-making; meanwhile, scholarship on print culture and education in nineteenth-century Bengal shows how translation, schoolbooks, and periodicals stabilized "standard" Bengali while expanding publics beyond elite *bhadralok* circles, even as gendered readings of *Ghare Baire* trace Tagore's indictment of performative masculinity and political seduction; placing these Bengali trajectories in comparative frame, classic theory on imagined communities highlights print-capitalism's creation of vernacular reading publics, while postcolonial critiques stress how anticolonial nationalisms carved a spiritual-cultural interior domain that assigned to literature, religion, and the domestic sphere the task of ethical self-fashioning; current language data underscore the stakes of this legacy—India today recognizes 22 scheduled languages amid hundreds of "other" mother tongues in official tabulations, while the People's Linguistic Survey of India has documented several hundred living languages across multivolume field reports—so contemporary debates over single-language aspirations, the status of "bhasha" vs "boli," and the politics of symbolic songs continue to draw on the nineteenth–twentieth-century repertoire forged by Bankim and reimagined by Tagore, reminding us that Indian nationalism was never a single script but a contested archive where literature both consecrated the nation as sacred mother and defended it as ethical community.

Theoretical background related to the study

Positioned at the crossroads of cultural nationalism, postcolonial literary studies, and the language and identity debates, this essay argues that Indian nationalism from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay through Rabindranath Tagore is a dynamic negotiation between the "inner" sphere of cultural sovereignty and the "outer" space of political modernity (Chatterjee), where the vernacular print sphere and literary forms crucially function as technologies for imagining the nation (Anderson), such that Bankim's *Anandamath* and the iconicity of *Vande Mataram* sacralize the motherland even as they establish a Hindu-majoritarian template of belonging even as they catalyze a new, horizontal fraternity through Bengali prose and periodicals; Tagore, by contrast, complicates this sacralization with a cosmopolitan critique that sees "nation" as a contingent, often violent Western artifact and reimagines community through ethical universals and dialogic pedagogy in *Nationalism* and *Ghare-Baire*, thereby dramatizing how mobilizing literature for collective identity and restraining it with humanist critique make unsettling bedfellows; drawing on Said, the essay places both Bankim and Tagore within an Orientalist knowledge economy that disciplined "India" as aesthetic object and civilizational lack, a discourse they variously occupy, resist, and re-write; via Bhabha, it reads their texts as ambivalent performances of hybridity vernacular modernities that mimic and displace colonial authority—so that nationalist signifiers (*Matribhumi*, "*Bharat Mata*," "home/world") are shown to be split, iterative, and open to subaltern reinscription; engaging Ngũgĩ and Fanon, it treats language choice, accent, and literary code-switching as psycho-affective terrain where colonial alienation, class aspiration, and emancipatory praxis collide, foregrounding how the vernacularizations can decolonize the mind yet also risk nativist closure unless held within plural, interlingual publics; methodologically, the essay pitches itself within current conceptual debates between civic and cultural nationalisms, monolingual homogenization and vernacular cosmopolitanism, archive-centered and subaltern-oriented historiographies, and majoritarian mobilization versus constitutional pluralism, proposing a conjunctural reading that follows how Bengali literary nationalism interpolates gender, caste, and religious difference across colonial and postcolonial conjunctures (e.g., the recent battles over *Vande Mataram*); to situate its present weight, the frame consults with policy and public discourse that restages the stakes of language in nation-making—especially India's National Education Policy 2020, which recommends that the home/mother-tongue function as the medium of instruction at least until Grade 5 and ideally Grade 8 and beyond, a policy decision that rekindles the long-standing bet that linguistic bonding nurtures democratic residency even as it raises questions of access, translation, and federal equity, and which

ministerial pronouncements and initiatives (e.g., AI translation tools such as Anuvadini and UDAAN) seek to duplicate into higher schooling thus showing how the Bankim–Tagore axis continues to organize contestation of whether literature and schooling should shore up a single national “voice” or cultivate a polyphonic, dialogic republic held together by inter-vernacular exchange and ethical restraint, and ultimately maintaining that Indian nationalism’s literary-linguistic politics are best understood as an ongoing, contested project of imagining and un-imagining the nation across unequal publics, from nineteenth-century print to twenty-first-century classrooms and code.

Historical Context

Set against the transformation of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal under British colonial rule, this study frames the role of language and literature in Indian nationalism as the outcome of intertwined regimes of governance, education, and print that reconfigured cultural life—beginning with administrative knowledge projects and utilitarian education that privileged English through Macaulay’s Minute (1835) and the system-building Wood’s Despatch (1854), even as institutions like Fort William College (1800) and missionary presses catalyzed vernacular standardization, translation, and a modern Bengali reading public (Macaulay, 1835/2013; Dispatch of 1854, n.d.; Fort William College, n.d.; National Translation Mission, 2021), producing the *bhadralok* intelligentsia whose social power flowed from English education, clerical employment, and control of periodical culture yet remained imbricated with caste privilege and new urban middle-class aspirations (Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Ghosh, 2000), while language policy oscillated between English as the vehicle of higher learning and vernaculars for elementary schooling—an ambivalence that shaped literary publics, pedagogies, and political idioms (Macaulay, 1835/2013; Dispatch of 1854, n.d.); within this milieu Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Anandamath* (1882) and the hymn “Vande Mataram” forged a sacred cartography of the nation that circulated across journals, novels, and songs to animate *Swadeshi* mobilization following the 1905 Partition of Bengal (Chattopadhyay, 1882/2005; “Vande Mataram,” 2025; Partition of Bengal, 2025; Sarkar, 1973), even as Rabindranath Tagore’s counterpoint—from *Ghare-Baire* to the 1916–1917 *Nationalism* lectures—subjected the very category of the nation to ethical and cosmopolitan critique while experimenting with dialogic education at Santiniketan to re-root modernity in the vernacular and in inter-cultural conversation (Tagore, 1916/2005; Tagore, 1917/2009; Tagore, 1917/2018), thereby situating both figures within a Bengal Renaissance that leveraged print capitalism, translation, and school reforms to produce novel publics in which English and Bengali were at once resources, battlegrounds, and boundary-markers; and as a coda that confirms the continued salience of these nineteenth-century debates, contemporary India’s National Education Policy 2020 urges the home/mother tongue as medium of instruction at least until Grade 5 and preferably Grade 8 and beyond, while state capacity is being built through AI-enabled translation initiatives—Bhashini (National Language Translation Mission) and AICTE’s Anuvadini/UDAAN—to expand higher-education access in Indian languages, with recent rollouts such as IGNOU’s MBA in Hindi and Odia underscoring a policy push toward multilingual professional education that replays the colonial-era tension between democratizing access via vernaculars and leveraging English for global mobility (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020; Press Information Bureau, 2022; BHASHINI, 2022; AICTE-Anuvadini, 2025).

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay: Literature as National Awakening

Positioning Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay as a principal theorist of Bengali nationalism and revivifying thought, this section argues that Chattopadhyay’s fiction and essays marshaled a semi-sacral idiom to convert cultural memory into nationalist affect, with *Anandamath* (1882) and “Vande Mataram” providing a paradigmatic case of literature as national awakening by scripting the motherland as a goddess and the reader as a devotee citizen, in a move that conjoined the Sannyasi rising and famine-racked late 18th-century Bengal with the late 19th-century’s mobilization through a print vernacular public sphere (Chattopadhyay, 1882/2005; S. Sarkar, 1973); the novel’s plot and paratexts staged an allegory of political regeneration in which an ascetic brotherhood, disciplined through oaths and song, enacted a pedagogic nationalism knotted together with Hindu symbols (Durga, shakti, ascetic *tapas*), and through a Sanskritized Bengali register whose exalted language and mantra-like cadences functioned to bind an odd commonwealth of readers around a devotional-civic community (Chattopadhyay, 1882/2005; Encyclopedia.com, n.d.); (as liturgical refrain and later as India’s national song by canonization), *Vande Mataram* circulated through journals, meetings, and marches as a portable chant of belonging that condensed the novel’s theology of the nation (its fatherland, its mother tongue, its sacred duty to fight, its aesthetic heroization of war) into a repeatable ritual of voice and body (Bhattacharya, 2013; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025a, 2025b); read through the optic of revivalist thought, then, Bankim’s project revives classical authority (the idiom and iconography of the goddess, the disciplinary ideal of renunciation) to counter colonial denigration and native listlessness but also risks restricting the nation to being culturally Hindu, a tension later critics have traced in the text’s gendered allegory of the mother/sons and in its selected memory of community, caste, and region (T. Sarkar, 2001; Chatterjee, 1993; Sen, 2008); the sonic and lexical texture of *Vande Mataram*, with its admixture of Sanskrit and Bengali and its liturgical imagery (*su-jalām su-phalam, varadam mataram*), shows how Bankim forged a quasi-scriptural vernacular—a “civic-bhakti” style, we might call it—that raised the everyday tongue into a vessel of collective consecration while standardizing taste and pedagogy via anthologies, school recitations, and translations (Bhattacharya, 2013; Chattopadhyay, 1882/2005), and this style radiated into the visual domain through the *Bharat Mata* iconity popularized in *Swadeshi*-era Bengal, especially Abanindranath Tagore’s watercolor from 1905, which translated Bankim’s maternal nation into an icon of mass devotion and ethicized labor (S. Sarkar, 1973; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025c); conceptually, then, Bankim’s contribution is to show that cultural consolidation can be expedited by semisacralized literature that sutures scriptural authority to print capitalism, producing a fraternity articulated not by administrative command, but by shared sound, symbol, and sentiment, even as the force of this consolidation creates constitutive exclusions that later nationalist and constitutional discourses have had to reckon with (Chatterjee, 1993; T. Sarkar, 2001; Bhattacharya, 2013), and in this regard, *Anandamath* and *Vande Mataram* exemplify an influential but equivocal template for Indian nation-making in which the literary becomes liturgical, the vernacular becomes venerated, and the imagined community becomes audible as chorus.

Rabindranath Tagore: Cosmopolitanism and Critique of Nationalism

Casting Rabindranath Tagore as a cosmopolitan critic of militant nationalism, this section posits his literary philosophy against the mechanical pusillanimity of the nation, instead advocating for an ethically grounded humanism that places person, community, and dialogic openness at the center, a position most explicitly formulated in the Nationalism lectures—where he warns against the “organized self-interest” of the modern nation-state and insists on an ethical-social renewal rather than political despotism—and dramatically staged in Ghare-Baire through the tripartite narration that contrasts Sandip’s incendiary Swadeshi populism with Nikhil’s principled nonviolence and Bimala’s self-disenchanted passage from enchantment to disillusion (Tagore, 1917/2012; Tagore, 1916/2005), as his language choices—clear, musical Bengali prose and lyrical cadences that remain accessible without betraying philosophical reach—further a universalist horizon that gleams camaraderie across borders even as it is rooted in local idiom (Chaudhuri, 2020; Radice, 2005; Tagore, 2011), while his educational experiment at Santiniketan/Visva-Bharati institutionalizes this meld, envisioning “the world in a single nest” (*yatra visvam bhavati eka nidam*) and translating literary humanism into pedagogic practice that aims at intercultural reciprocity instead of nationalist exclusion (Visva-Bharati, n.d.; Britannica, 2025); read conceptually, Tagore’s project mediates a tension between nationalism and internationalism in rejecting both uncritical patriotic zeal and what he described as a “colourless” cosmopolitan vapidness, instead endorsing a rooted internationalism that honors cultural particularity without embracing chauvinism (Tagore, 1917/2012; Singh, 2025), so that Ghare-Baire serves as a cautionary allegory of how aesthetic rhetoric and sacralized sloganeering can deteriorate into coercion, while the lectures articulate a counter-politics of hospitality, dialogue, and civic restraint (Tagore, 1916/2005; Tagore, 1917/2012); stylistically, his strategic code-switching between Bengali and English, and his preference for uncluttered syntax, metaphorical perspicuity, and song-forms (*rabindra-sangit*), build a literary public that is both vernacular and planetary, facilitating translatability without acceding to homogenizing universalism (Chaudhuri, 2020; Tagore, 2011), and more recent scholarship has re-emphasized this balancing act—arguing that Tagore charts a trajectory “beyond uncritical nationalism and colourless cosmopolitanism”—thereby reaffirming the ethical internationalism of his humane humanism in a world marked by resurgent ethno-nationalisms (Singh, 2025; IGNOU, n.d.); finally, Tagore’s cosmopolitan humanism lays out a way to imagine literature: literature might oppose militant nationalism not by withdrawing into abstraction but by concocting an accessible Bengali (and translated) shape that enacts universalism-in-particular an ethics of relation and critique that reimagines the nation as a permeable community accountable to a larger human commonwealth.

Comparative Conceptual Analysis

Sideline them, and juxtapose Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore, and we map an arc of concepts from revivalist to ethical unity as their language choices, literary tropes, and ideological aims diverge and converse—Bankim’s Sanskritized Bengali, deliberately hybridized with archaisms, mantric refrains, and a devotional register, transforms prose and poetry into quasi-liturgical media of Hindu-coded fraternity around the figure of the motherland (Chattopadhyay, 1882/2005; Bhattacharya, 2013; Chatterjee, 1993), while Tagore’s lucid, lyrical Bengali (often self-translated or paralleled in English) prefers transparent syntax, musical cadence, and communicative intimacy for a cross-cultural address without dislodging rootedness (Chaudhuri, 2020; Tagore, 1916/2005, 1917/2012); symbolically, where Anandamath and its eked hymn “Vande Mataram” stage ascetic fraternities disciplining the self through song and sacralize nation as Bharat Mata, a maternal deity whose iconographic afterlife in Abanindranath Tagore’s 1905 watercolor compresses Bankim’s texted theology into an iconic emblem of ethical labour or patriotic devotion (Chattopadhyay, 1882/2005; Bhattacharya, 2013; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025a, 2025b), Ghare-Baire dramatizes seductions and grunt-violence of militant Swadeshi through Sandip’s rhetoric countered in Nikhil’s ethic restraint and Bimala’s moral illumination and the Nationalism lectures spurn the “mechanical” nation-state for a humanist fraternity based on cooperation, hospitability, and spiritual reciprocity (Tagore, 1916/2005; Tagore, 1917/2012); ideologically, where Bankim’s end is cultural unity, semi-sacral literature mobilizing Sanskrit symbols (*Durga*, *shakti*), ritualized address (“Vande Mataram”), and a hieratic style to bind diverse readers into a devotional-civic fraternity resistant to colonial humiliation but perhaps in danger of shrinking the nation’s perimeters (Chatterjee, 1993; Bhattacharya, 2013), Tagore’s aim is ethically charged internationalism, one that kickboxes chauvinist nationalism and “colourless” cosmopolitanism, and ultimates a rooted universalism institutionalized at Santiniketan/Visva-Bharati as “the world in a single nest” (Tagore, 1917/2012; Chaudhuri, 2020); hence, the trajectory of nationalist thought breaks down from Bankim’s revivalist unity where literature sacralizes a society and standardizes taste through school recitation, anthologies, public chant—to Tagore’s universalist interrogative where literature questions power, heals communal wounds, and models dialogic citizenship through vernacular prose, song, pedagogy (Chattopadhyay, 1882/2005; Tagore, 1916/2005; Tagore, 1917/2012; Singh, 2025); in this side view, each invests the text in politics and morals Bankim to enchant and consolidate a community of faith-nation by accentuated diction and goddess imagery, and Tagore to disenchant militant zeal and re-enchant civic life via humane lyricism so we see how the literary-linguistic project of Indian nationalism oscillates between sacral consolidation and ethical opening, and how Tagore’s critique neither undoes Bankim’s affective invention nor replay it, but translates the energies of revivalism into an open, planetary ethics.

Discussion related to the study

Interpreting the implications of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s and Rabindranath Tagore’s literary interventions for Indian nationalism, this study argues that vernacular literary production both forged and interrogated the nation: Bankim’s Sanskritized Bengali and semi-sacral symbolism in *Ānandamath* and the embedded hymn “Vande Mataram” transformed prose and song into political liturgy that consolidated a Hindu-coded fraternity around the motherland—later echoed visually in Abanindranath Tagore’s *Bharat Mata*—thereby mobilizing a potent repertoire of signs for anti-colonial awakening while delimiting the imagined community’s boundaries (Chattopadhyay, 1882/2005; Bhattacharya, 2013; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025a, 2025b; Chatterjee, 1993), whereas Tagore’s accessible, lyrical Bengali and his *Nationalism* lectures, alongside the cautionary allegory of *Ghare-Baire*,

refuted militant chauvinism and the “mechanical” nation-state by proposing a humanist internationalism rooted in dialogic pedagogy and ethical reciprocity (Tagore, 1917/2012; Tagore, 1916/2005; Chaudhuri, 2020); viewed through Anderson’s thesis, both writers extended print-capitalism’s capacity to generate horizontal solidarities—Bankim by sacralizing a shared sonic-textual repertoire, Tagore by widening vernacular address toward global kinship—thus showing how literature acts as a political and moral instrument that can enchant communities into existence and also disenchant them from passion’s coercions (Anderson, 2006; Tagore, 1917/2012); the vernacular’s role in resisting colonial domination appears in the way Bengali became a vehicle for self-fashioning, debate, and mass pedagogy against the epistemic hierarchy of English, a decolonial wager that continues in policy and infrastructure today—NEP 2020’s advocacy of mother-tongue instruction through at least Grade 5 (preferably to Grade 8), translation missions such as BHASHINI and AICTE’s Anuvadini/UDAAN, and recent implementations like CBSE’s “mother-tongue first” rollout and IGNOU’s MBA in Hindi and Odia—illustrating how language choice structures access, dignity, and citizenship (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020; Press Information Bureau, 2022, 2024; AICTE, 2025; The Times of India, 2025a, 2025b; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986); yet the discussion must hold the duality of nationalism—liberation versus exclusion—because the very symbols that liberate can naturalize majoritarian imaginaries (the goddess-nation, the sanctified brotherhood), while Tagore’s counterpoint presses for a rooted universalism wary of homogenizing identity, seeking instead a porous community accountable to broader human values (Chatterjee, 1993; Tagore, 1917/2012; Tagore, 1916/2005); in sum, their convergences and frictions chart how imagined communities are made and remade by literature’s forms—chant, novel, lecture, song where the vernacular can be simultaneously a weapon of decolonization and a site of ethical testing, and where the task of nationalism evolves from revivalist unity to cosmopolitan responsibility.

Conclusion

Drawing together the study’s threads, we conclude that literature in nineteenth twentieth-century Bengal functioned as a medium for national consciousness by aestheticizing collective life—Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Ānandamath* and its hymn “Vande Mataram” sacralized the motherland through a Sanskritized Bengali that turned reading and recitation into political ritual, while Rabindranath Tagore’s lucid, lyrical Bengali (and English self-translations) mobilized narrative, song, and pedagogy to critique the “mechanical” nation and imagine a humane public sphere—so that language itself emerges as both identity and ideology, a vernacular commons that resists colonial hierarchies of English yet can also harden into majoritarian boundaries (Chattopadhyay, 1882/2005; Tagore, 1916/2005; Tagore, 1917/2012; Chatterjee, 1993); understood through Anderson’s insight that print creates “imagined communities,” Bankim’s semi-sacral idiom binds dispersed readers into a devotional-civic fraternity, while Tagore reorients the imagined community toward ethical universality and intercultural reciprocity (Anderson, 2006; Tagore, 1917/2012), and this dual legacy clarifies nationalism’s doubleness—its powers of liberation against imperial domination alongside its risks of exclusion through religious or linguistic narrowing (Chattopadhyay, 1882/2005; Chatterjee, 1993; Tagore, 1916/2005); the contemporary policy landscape underscores these stakes, as India’s National Education Policy 2020 recommends mother-tongue or regional-language instruction at least to Grade 5 (preferably to Grade 8 and beyond), while state-backed translation infrastructures such as BHASHINI and allied initiatives aim to enable higher-education and digital access in Indian languages, and school systems pilot “mother-tongue first” and ed-tech integrations—developments that renew the promise of decolonizing access even as they revive debates over mobility, equity, and federal balance (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020; Press Information Bureau, 2025; Times of India, 2025a; Times of India, 2025b); reflecting on the figures’ legacies, we find Bankim’s revivalist unification and Tagore’s cosmopolitan restraint continue to script modern Indian thought and practice, from classrooms to civic argument, while future research should extend this comparative lens to Gandhi’s advocacy of Hindustani as a bridge across communities, Nehru’s constitutional pragmatism amid language conflicts, and Ambedkar’s critical reflections on linguistic states and democratic participation each offering distinct models of how language policy and moral vision co-produce the nation’s publics (Gandhi, 1946/2003; King, 1997; Ambedkar, 1955/2014; Constituent Assembly Debates, n.d.; New Yorker, 2024), thereby positioning literature and language not as background scenery but as the very instruments through which India has imagined, contested, and continues to renegotiate the meaning of national belonging.

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