



Vande Mataram and Jana Gana Mana
Two national symbols and one debate

Shamik Basu
Student, Department of History
Jadavpur University

Received on: 29th April 2026
Accepted on: 08th May 2026

Abstract: In 1937, a debate regarding India's national anthem and national song, primarily Vande Mataram and Jana Gana mana, intensified following the introduction of provincial autonomy. Vande Mataram, composed by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, became a rallying cry during the Indian freedom struggle, strengthening nationalist feelings in the Indian countrymen. However, despite its popularity, the Indian National Congress faced internal conflicts and external pressures from the All-India Muslim League. Rabindranath Tagore's Jana Gana Mana evolved to gain acceptance as the national anthem of India while Vande Mataram was designated as the National Song.

Keywords: Vande Mataram, Jana Gana Mana, INC.

Introduction:

The year 1937 brought up the question of choosing Indian National Anthem¹ and National Song², which in its course led to considerable debate and, at times, caused division in Indian society. Vande Mataram and Jana Gana Mana became main subjects of the debate. It is also interesting and at the same time astonishing to see and know how people of Indian subcontinent, throughout her long and rich history, get quickly mobilized by religion. For the reason, the previously mentioned debate became a significant tool for communal groups in the movement to reject Vande Mataram as national anthem. Of course, the British exercised the plethora of advantages from it.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Vande Mataram and its Impact:

Vande Mataram was composed by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, who played a crucial role in shaping modern prose and inspiring a spirit of nationalism in India through literature. Although Vande Mataram belonged to the novel Anandamath, where this was sung by the Santans, a group of ascetic warrior-monks dedicated to the liberation of the motherland. Bankim Chandra first composed this novel independently in 1875 and it was published in the first edition of Bangadarshan journal. Amid the speculations that this song

was used by Bankim Chandra for page-make-up for an empty space of Bangadarshan journal, he was always proud of this creation and strongly believed in its potential of influencing people. Original tune of the song Vande Mataram was composed by Jadunath Bhattacharya, which became the call for arms during the anti-partition movement in Bengal.

Vande Mataram, with its wildfire popularity, made the British issue circulars against it and threaten students with debarment from government jobs if they participated in this movement. People of Barisal, however, faced severe police brutality for singing the song. Yet, every British attempt to suppress Vande Mataram made it even more influential. In the Calcutta session of Indian National Congress in 1896, Rabindranath Tagore sang this song in Raag Desh. In this way, Vande Mataram and its slogan became a priceless gift from Bengal to Indian national politics and came to be widely recognized as the National Song.

The Inception of the Debate:

While Vande Mataram inspired nationalists as both a song and a slogan, there also existed a few voices opposing it. The question that has emerged is why the Indian National Congress (INC) opposed Vande Mataram? This has been a recurring debate in the historical academia ever since.

In 1937, the British Government introduced provincial autonomy in Indian States and allowed elections. Therefore, after the election, most provinces were governed by the INC, except Bengal and Punjab, which were led by the All-India Muslim League (AIML). The AIML, in its Lucknow Session, made a proposal against Vande Mataram which quite naturally gained support from the British. At that time, the INC leadership faced dual problems. Bengal, the hub of the Independence struggle, was witnessing protests against Vande Mataram. On the other hand, there was no option to ignore the demands of the elected government. Naturally, the INC was forced to participate in the debate whether Vande Mataram should be the National Song or not.

Despite its ever-increasing popularity and presence in the INC meetings and gatherings, only the first two stanzas of Vande Mataram were accepted in the wider context of Indian National Movement. In reality, it was not officially adopted by various political platforms across all parts of undivided India. Furthermore, its acceptability across different castes, creeds and religions was seriously questioned.

In this regard, in 1937, the Hindustan Standard, an English daily, published the statement of the Indian National Congress and said that The Working Committee felt that in the interest of unity and universal acceptance, the first two stanzas are acceptable because of its non-objectionable nature. The remaining stanzas of the song are neither commonly known nor sung.

It is clear that the song Vande Mataram was not only facing controversy within the country, but had also entered a phase of being partially curtailed. To suppress the controversy, it was stated that the need for compiling an authorized version of national songs has long been felt. The Congress Working Committee thus formed a sub-committee for this purpose with members like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. It was decided that the next meeting of the Congress Working

Committee would be held in Calcutta in October 1937. After the meeting, songs that could be considered as potential national anthems would be submitted to the Committee. Rabindranath Tagore was to advise them. Thus began the campaign against Vande Mataram and Rabindranath was included in it.

Incidentally, it may be mentioned here that Rabindranath Tagore was initially sympathetic to the first two stanzas only for its sense of devotion towards the motherland and strong appeal. However, six years back, Rabindranath had a different view. Having grown up within the monotheistic tradition and ideals of the Tagore family, he never abandoned that stream of thought. A glimpse of it is reflected in the Amrita Bazar Patrika in 1931, where he said that improving lives of the countrymen hold more importance than creating a goddess image of India and venerating her.

During the Working Committee meeting of the Indian National Congress held in Calcutta between October 26 and November 1, 1937, the controversy over Vande Mataram further intensified. At the time, given the country's diversity of languages and religions, serious doubts were raised about its suitability and acceptability as India's national song. However, the All India Congress Committee did not step back from its earlier decision to review Vande Mataram. Naturally, it was decided that only the first two stanzas of Vande Mataram could be sung. In addition, the decision of the sub-committee and the Working Committee of the INC on the question of national anthem would be final and binding on all concerned and they actually left no stone unturned to enforce their decision. The main accused was the then All India Congress Working Committee. For indirect support, Rabindranath Tagore was criticized. Jawaharlal Nehru faced severe criticism, because he was directly involved in the process of partial deletion. Subhas Chandra Bose, despite being a member of the accused Congress Working Committee, remained practically silent on the matter. Mahatma Gandhi was the sole exception, as he strongly supported the use of Vande Mataram as national song. Against this decision, strong protests that arose in Bengal were clearly reflected in the contemporary newspapers and journals like the Anandabazar Patrika. Simultaneously, in the pages of journals like Modern Review, Ramananda Chattopadhyay, in a firm and resolute tone, consistently expressed his views in support of Vande Mataram.

Jana Gana Mana: It's Primary Acceptance as India's National Anthem:

After India became independent, discussion began once again on the question of selecting the national anthem. There, Rabindranath Tagore's Jana Gana Mana Adhinayaka emerged as the central focus. Rabindranath composed Jana Gana Mana in 1911. Although he personally regarded it as a Brahmo Sangeet (a devotional or spiritual hymn), its spirit is clearly patriotic. The song was first sung on 27 December 1911 at the 26th session of the Indian National Congress. In January 1912, it was officially published in the Tattwabodhini Patrika, edited by Tagore, under the title Bharat Bhagya Bidhata. Later, in 1917, at the 32nd Congress Session held under the presidency of Annie Besant, Jana Gana Mana was once again performed. In 1936, the English translation of the song was done by the poet himself. Later, this portion was translated from Rabindranath Tagore's handwritten manuscript and published in the Theosophical College Magazine.

The reason for the acceptance of Jana Gana Mana as the National Anthem was explained by Professor Prabodh Chandra Sen in India's National Anthem. He said that Subhas Chandra, while in Germany, formed the Azad Hind Bahini and Jana Gana Mana was accepted as its national anthem. Later, in East Asia, when the Azad Hind Government was established, this song was also accorded the status of the national anthem. At that time, under Subhas Chandra's direction, the song was translated into Hindustani. Although the song underwent considerable changes during this translation, the essence of the original song remained intact and its original melody was also preserved. In fact, the Azad Hind Government regarded this Hindustani version as essentially derived from the Bengali Jana Gana Mana. Therefore, in the official directive of the Azad Hind Government it was said that Tagore's Jaya-ho had become the National Anthem. In the introduction to his book, Professor Sen has presented evidence for this. He also wrote about Anandamohan Sahay, the editor of the Azad Hind Government's newspaper and the Military Secretary of INA. A. Sahay was closely involved in the selection of national anthem and took the initiative with the help of musician Hossain, to prepare a Hindustani adaptation of Jana Gana Mana, entitled Shubh Sukh.

Final Solution of the Debate:

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's comments in the Constituent Assembly, on 25 August 1948, marked the nearing end of this debate. He said that although Jana Gana Mana was widely accepted, it did not fully met expectations. In the absence of a suitable alternative, he had consulted the Provincial Governors; asked them to seek the opinions of their respective Chief Ministers, while clarifying that the final decision lay with the Assembly. All Governors except that of Madhya Pradesh supported this song, which led to a necessary interim decision amid prevailing pressures. Accordingly, the Central Cabinet Ministry decided that until the Constituent Assembly reached a final decision, Jana Gana Mana would be used as the national anthem.

Finally, on 24 January 1950, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India, announced that the Constituent Assembly had unanimously accepted Jana Gana Mana as the 'National Anthem of India'. At the same time, because of its everlasting effect on the Indian mind, Vande Mataram was also adopted as the 'National Song of India'. At the end, both were given equal status.

Notes:

- 1. National Anthem:** The idea of National Anthems developed in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when nationalism and the idea of national sovereignty were growing in Europe. Earlier, in monarchies and feudal states, songs mainly praised kings and royal families. Later, during the times of revolution and political change, these songs became popular among people and began to represent the nation through patriotic songs.
- 2. National Song:** A National Song is a patriotic composition officially adopted by a government. It reflects the history, culture, pride, unity, love and ideals of a nation. It is closely connected with the identity of the people and often holds a status similar to a national anthem.

References:

1. Adhya, G. L., 'India's Struggle for Independence: Visuals and Documents', New Delhi, National Council of Educational Research and Training, 1985
2. Bose, S. K., 'Bankim Chandra Chatterjee', New Delhi, Publications Division, Government of India, 1974
3. Sen, Prabodhchandra, 'India's National Anthem', Calcutta, Visva Bharati Publishing Department, Kolkata, 1972

Articles:

1. Dasgupta, Rabindra Kumar, 'The Poet of Our Anthem', In *Essays*, 'Lectures and Letters: A Selection of Rabindra Kumar Dasgupta', compiled, edited, and introduced by Biswanath Maji, Kolkata, 'Ebong Mushayera', July 2009
2. Ghosh, Tushar Kanti, ed. 'Resurgent India', Calcutta, Amrita Bazar Patrika Offset Press, 1983
3. Kumar, Kapil, 'Vande Mataram', 'The Organiser Weekly', 2025
https://www.academia.edu/144857806/Vande_Mataram
4. Singh, Rananjayaa. "Vande Mataram Functioning as the Core around Which Bankim Chandra Chatterji's *Anandamath*, or The Sacred Brotherhood, Is Conceived." 'Think India' (Quarterly Journal), 2019, <https://www.academia.edu/42649669>

