

Famine as a Plot Device in Anandamath

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Abstract:

The Bengal famine of the 1770s is used in *Anandamath*, which is frequently praised as India's first political novel, not only as a historical setting but also as a major narrative device that influences character, action, and philosophy. This paper argues that famine in the novel functions as a multidimensional plot device that simultaneously enables political awakening, gendered negotiations of hunger, and the transformation of bodies into sites of biopolitical violence. The study illustrates how hunger mediates the transition from individual pain to group militancy in the Santan uprising by closely examining many pivotal events, including infant abandonment, cannibalistic desire, pandemic sickness, and Kalyani's self-effacing fasting. It further situates Bankimchandra's representation of famine within the historical context of Company rule to show how narrative strategies obscure colonial culpability even as they mobilise proto-nationalist sentiment. In doing so, the paper links literary form, famine imaginary and emergent Indian nationalism.

Keywords: famine, biopolitics, nationalism, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, colonial Bengal, *Anandamath*.

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“...There’s a big famine on.

So many people are abandoning their children by the wayside.

We’ve had so many offers from people wanting to sell their children,

but who’ll take someone else’s child?”

~ Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Anandamath

The aforementioned lines are a famous excerpt from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Anandamath, which highlights the widespread suffering and its effects on families during famine, a recurrent theme throughout the book that vividly portrays the hopelessness and agony of that era. Published in 1882, Bankim Chandra Chatterji's groundbreaking novel Anandamath holds a special place in the canon of Indian literature since it is set against the backdrop of the Great Bengal Famine of 1770 (Chhiattorer Manwantar). It is not merely a historical romance; it is a “political laboratory” where Bankim tests the limits of human endurance and the birth of a national consciousness. This novel paints a vision of colonial India, where the Englishmen who colonised the country are presented as causing the Indians’ famine and poverty. After the novel was published, Indian nationalism began to take root among the populace, and a revolution began to take shape, which eventually helped India become an independent nation. Although Anandamath was not Bankim’s first book and was not, by any means, his greatest, it was important for many non-literary reasons, not the least of which was the enormous influence it had on later nationalist movements in Bengal and India. The novel was written in the late 19th century, but the events of the novel take place in the late 18th century, in 1773, which was the year of a dreadful famine in Bengal, and also the year of the Sanyasi Revolution. Famine, in this context, is the “primordial

soup” from which the revolution emerges. In the Bengali calendar year 1176, the convergence of drought and the predatory revenue policies of the East India Company resulted in a catastrophe that claimed an estimated one-third of the population. By choosing this specific era, Bankim creates a narrative where the “private” hunger of the stomach is forcibly converted into the “public” hunger for sovereignty. This paper seeks to explore how famine operates as the primary engine of the plot, driving characters out of their domestic spheres and into a militant, ascetic brotherhood.

Historical Context: The Dual Government and “Bare Life”

To understand famine as a plot device, one must first understand the political mechanics that Bankim critiques. After the Battle of Plassey (1757) and the subsequent Treaty of Allahabad (1765), the East India Company acquired the Diwani rights (revenue collection), while the puppet Nawabs retained the Nizamat (civil administration). This “Dual Government” created a power vacuum where responsibility was decoupled from authority.

According to Brian Gardner in *The East India Company: A History*, this approach permitted the Company to maximise extraction while reducing the burden of government. In *Anandamath*, this historical reality is the “invisible antagonist.” Instead of being presented as a “lack of rain” or other pure natural tragedy, the famine is presented as a systemic failing of the “Twin Deities” of nature and government. Bankim illustrates this through the village of Padachinho. Giorgio Agamben uses the term “bare life” to characterise life that has been deprived of all political and social rights and reduced to only biological survival. This estate was once an affluent one.

Famine as the Disruptor of the Domestic Sphere

The novel begins with the disintegration of the nuclear family, the most fundamental unit of social order. Aristocratic landowners Mohendro and Kalyani stand in for the “Old Order.” The levelling impact caused by hunger cannot be avoided by their wealth. The plot is set in motion when they are forced to flee their ancestral home. Famine serves as a centrifugal force in this instance, pulling characters away from their comfort zones.

The old feudal identity is symbolically killed when the ancestral home is abandoned. Upon entering the jungle, Mohendro and Kalyani find themselves in a “liminal space” where social norms are suspended. A crucial point in the story occurs when a group of famine-stricken raiders almost cannibalise Kalyani and her daughter. Bankim illustrates how famine weakens the human spirit by using the pretobotmurtishokol, a “monstrous” hungry body. Since hunger turns the “citizen” into a “demon,” the Santan Dal (Children of the Mother) is a new kind of spiritual and political intervention that is required.

The Biopolitics of the Hungry Body and "Santan" Diet

In Anandamath, hunger is a biopolitical phenomenon. It is the location where the state uses negligence to impose its will. Bankim emphasises the colonised body’s fragility by describing the four plagues: khoi (tuberculosis), olaotha (cholera), bashanta (smallpox), and jor (fever).

In Anandamath, the control of food in the Ananda Math (The Abbey of Bliss) is a crucial but sometimes disregarded story component. The ascetic warrior and the impoverished cannibal are the two types of hungry bodies that Bankim compares.

Hunger is shown as a “de-humanising” factor in the first few chapters. The ‘animalization’ of man, or what Giorgio Agamben refers to as *Zoē* (bare life), is symbolized by the invaders who abduct Kalyani. These people, motivated by the “demon of hunger,” are prepared to eat human flesh, violating the most basic social taboo. Famine serves as a story element in this instance, symbolizing the natural state in which “man is a wolf to man.”

Nevertheless, the story of hunger shifts when Mohendro enters the Abbey. The Santans, or Mother's Children, eat out of discipline rather than desperation. Their diet, rich in milk and ghee, represents a symbolic return to the “Aryan” body.

The Poverty Vow: The Santans do not give up strength, but they do give up riches and family.

The Transition: Bankim demonstrates that political sovereignty starts with bodily control by contrasting the “regulated consumption” of the Abbey with the “involuntary starvation” of the hamlet.

The famine serves to prove that the “old body” (the weak, tax-paying peasant) must die so that the “new body” (the militant monk) can be born. In the biopolitical environment of the Abbey, food catalyses the “Mother’s” emancipation rather than as a commodity.

Bankim performs a brilliant narrative inversion. He changes the hungry body from being a place of victimisation to one of resistance. The rebels, known as the Santans, engage in a kind of “curated hunger.” They adopt food limitations and asceticism as a political and spiritual discipline rather than as a result of hardship. This transition from “involuntary starvation” to “voluntary fasting” is crucial. It marks the transition from the defenceless victim to the soldier of revolution.

Gendered Negotiations of Hunger

The gendered dimension of famine in the novel is an important, although frequently disregarded, feature. Female hunger is frequently stifled in the Brahmanical patriarchal system that Bankim lives in to aid male survival. Kalyani's rejection of Bhavananda's offer of food and rescue is presented as an act of "Sati-like" devotion. While her husband, the "lord," is probably hungry, she is unable to eat.

Kalyani uses her hunger as a "silent" story device. It draws attention to how the "ideal" Hindu woman is self-effacing, but it also poses a narrative dilemma. The woman and the child are the domestic bonds that must be broken for the revolution to be successful. The "convenient" reason for this separation is the famine. The narrative makes it possible for Mohendro to become a member of the Santans' all-male brotherhood by making the world too perilous for a woman and kid. The "Mother" is now the symbolic Mother (the Land/Goddess) rather than the biological mother (Kalyani).

The Iconography of the Three Mothers

The most famous sequence in the novel is the revelation of the three images of the Mother, which is directly tied to the famine. Satyananda leads Mohendro through a series of chambers:

Jagaddhatri: The Mother as she was (Prosperity).

Kali: The Mother as she is (The famine-stricken, dark, naked goddess of destruction).

Durga: The Mother as she will be (The resplendent, ten-armed victory).

Kali's personification, "shrouded in darkness, lean and skeletal," is a clear representation of the famine of 1770. Her dark skin symbolises the grimness of death, and her nudity symbolises the land depleted of its resources. Here, famine is not merely a backdrop, but also it is the Goddess's actual physical condition. Mohendro is ultimately radicalised by this image. He understands that the Mother's cosmic pain is a part of his personal grief.

Narrative Strategies and Colonial Culpability

A strong narrative tension is created by Bankim's role as a Deputy Magistrate under the British administration, despite the fact that *Anandamath* is a nationalist text. While the "Englishman" is occasionally presented as an eventual bringer of order in the contentious epilogue, the novel frequently places the blame for the famine on the "corrupt" local tax collectors or the "inept" Muslim Nawabs.

However, the "famine imaginary" within the plot contradicts this. The descriptions of the Company's soldiers seizing the last grains of rice from dying villagers speak louder than any pro-British disclaimer. The famine acts as a "subversive plot device" that reveals the inherent violence of colonial extraction, even when the author's explicit commentary tries to soften the blow.

The "Vande Mataram" Hymn: A Landscape of Abundance in a Time of Lack

The inclusion of the hymn *Vande Mataram* is the novel's most significant cultural contribution. Within the plot, the song serves as a contrapuntal device. While the characters are surrounded by parched earth, skeletal corpses, and dried-up rivers, the song praises a land that is: Shujalam (Rich in waters), Shufalam (Rich in fruit), and Shashya-shyamalam (Green with crops).

This creates a deliberate cognitive dissonance for the reader. Why sing of abundance in a time of famine?

Famine serves as a dialectical plot technique in this situation. The song's depiction of the "Motherland" is the eschatological promise of a liberated India, not the actual geography of Bengal in 1770. The purpose of the song is to remind the reader and the characters of what has been taken. Bankim utilises hunger as an excuse for the rebellion's violence by contrasting the "Sujala/Shufala" imagery with the "Chiattorer Monnontor" (The hunger of '76). The Nawabs and the British are presented as the "thieves" who have transformed a lush paradise into a cemetery. Thus, the hymn is a lawsuit against the coloniser for the crime of artificial scarcity rather than merely a song of praise.

Analysis

Famine is poignantly used as a plot device by the author throughout the novel. The aristocratic landowners of Padachinho village, Kalyani and Mohendro are the protagonists of this narrative. They were thrown into the political story of Colonial Bengal, where there was social unrest brought about by the great famine of 1770. They are forced to leave their community due to the threat of famine. Mohendro gets separated from his wife and child while traversing the ravaged area. The story is intricately woven, but the main events of the book can be seen when, after famine and disease decimated the whole of Bengal, the aristocratic couple Mohendro and his wife Kalyani desperately left their home province to find food. However, while travelling, Kalyani and their infant daughter got kidnapped by destitute bands of raiders who planned to cannibalise the girl as they were starving. Kalyani was agitated due to hunger; therefore, she managed to escape during the fight because she was motivated by hunger and was rescued by the intervention of a

mysterious ascetic named Bhavananda. Bhavananda was a member of a group of rebel Hindu ascetics who decided to take up arms against the Mughal and British overlords of Bengal and accused them of being responsible for the poverty and suffering. In the ritualistic Hindu Brahmanical patriarchal culture, where Anandamath is located, male hunger is valued over female hunger, creating a gender gap that discriminates based on even the most fundamental human need. Bankim, who appears to be solidly on the side of Orthodoxy, has Kalyani tell Bhavananda after she is saved that even though she has been starved for a long time, she is unable to eat the food that is put in front of her because her husband Mohendro is still going without food.

This narrative took place during the East India Company's reign and the catastrophic famine that it brought about in Bengal's Diwani in 1770. The famine is mentioned in the Bengali calendar year 1176 and is immortalised in the horrifying word “Chiattorer Monnontor” in Bengali. The East India Company established a dual form of government in Bengal after the Battle of Plassey in 1757. With the East India Company's victory in the Battle of Plassey, they took possession of Bengal's Diwani. This authority was institutionalised, and a dual system of governance was formed by the Treaty of Allahabad in 1765. This arrangement gave the East India Company control over the province's revenue collection while leaving the Mughal Nawabs in charge of overseeing the civilian government. Because of the division of powers, the Company was able to establish a political framework in which it possessed considerable financial authority but not direct governmental authority. In the book *“East India Company: A History,”* Brian Gardner writes that although the East India Company's directors in London first saw the company largely as a trade company, Lord Clive, who was present in Bengal, understood the underlying political aspect of the situation. Gardner sees this separation of authority as the reason why Bankim's story claims that the region experienced famine and destruction. It's possible that Bankim

contended that the separation of fiscal authority from civic duty resulted in a scenario where the Company could collect money without having to attend to the citizens' requirements for welfare and governance.

Hunger is not just a biological need; it is also a bio-political force that mobilises populations and people to participate in protests, including food riots, strikes, and marches, which frequently change the power and governance structures within communities. According to the World Food Program, "eliminating hunger, poverty and disease is not only an urgent humanitarian and medical goal, but it is also 'a matter of national security, peace and stability' ". Bankim has articulated hunger in his narrative through various instances; the bodies of the raiders who kidnapped the protagonist Kalyani and her daughter were emaciated. By describing the raiders' bodies in such a way, Bankim tries to portray human bodies that have crossed the threshold of hunger and have become something inhuman. He eloquently calls them "pretobtmurtishokol" or "demonic figures", but they were demons of hunger who were driven by starvation to the concluding act of animal nature, which is cannibalism. The severity of famine-related diseases is portrayed in *Anandamath* as wreaking havoc on community after community. The four diseases mentioned in the text are jor (common or viral fever), olaotha (cholera), khoi (T.B.), and bashanta (smallpox). The majority of these diseases are historically endemic to India, but their ability to spread is facilitated by inadequate nutrition.

Although the novel's first several chapters are dominated by the themes of starvation and famine, these themes ultimately vanish with the arrival of the Santan Dal. Nevertheless, the political uprisings are motivated by these themes. The twin deities of nature and governance, or the absence of it, are held accountable for the famine by Bankim in *Anandamath*. A highly perceptual image of the causes of famines is the destruction caused by political decisions. Bankim's

model is seriously faulty because it minimises the responsibility of the British government. In “*The Black Hole of Empire*”, Partha Chatterjee states, “Historians estimate that a third of the population of Bengal was killed, making it one of the worst famines of modern history”. The novelist has mentioned that he did not wish to write a political novel, even if the famine and the rebellion were historically documented events. However, he does not highlight the work's historicity to demonstrate what truly occurred in 1773. But because of our English education, the book is a historical work that contains the idea of nationhood. The story captures the anxieties of the author's era very poignantly, which was characterised by the emergence of nationalism.

Conclusion

Anandamath demonstrates how famine operates as far more than a historical setting; it becomes the crucial narrative force that structures plot, character, and ideology. By foregrounding hunger, disease, and dispossession, the novel transforms private bodily suffering into a catalyst for collective political consciousness and armed resistance. The portrayal of gendered hunger, especially through Kalyani, reveals how patriarchal norms are reinscribed even amid revolutionary upheaval. At the same time, the narrative partially displaces the full extent of colonial culpability, converting historical catastrophe into a mythic ground for proto-nationalist imagination. Overall, the paper shows that Bankimchandra's imaginary famine is central to understanding the novel's articulation of nation, sacrifice, and sovereignty.

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