

Celebrating 150 years of Vande Mataram



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*"Mother, your voice flows steady and clear,
A call that India will forever hold dear.
Its echo grew from verse to vow,
Vande Mataram lives in every heartbeat now."*

My dear children of the future, across the stretch of time, I write to you from a quieter century – an age when India longed to awaken. I never imagined that a hymn born in the pages of my notebook would endure revolutions, traverse borders, outlive languages, and survive generations. Yet here you stand, in a world beyond my imagination, still repeating the same salutation 150 years later. *Vande Mataram*. A simple bow to the motherland that blossomed into a collective heartbeat.

Birth that touched a million lives

When I first wrote these words, I instinctively reached for Sanskrit, a language carrying the weight of our civilisation. *Vande* means 'I bow' or 'I salute'. *Mataram* invokes the mother in all her forms. The phrase was never meant to command patriotism. It sought to awaken tenderness. I wanted India's children to remember that their first duty was to the land that sustained them. This greeting quietly began touching lives. Students whispered it in colleges in Bengal. Thinkers and reformers of the time interpreted it as an affirmation of collective strength. It travelled across presidencies and regions, and found meaning in different tongues. Many wrote to me saying that the song felt like a lamp lit in the dark years of colonial uncertainty.

Early footsteps that stirred a nation

Vande Mataram was first written as an independent poem before finding its permanent home in my novel *Anandamath* in 1882. The story imagined a band of ascetics fighting for a motherland battered by foreign rule. Their inner fire represented the spirit that lived within the people long before political resistance took organised shape. The song's influence soon grew beyond literature. Colonial authorities often banned its public chanting. Yet, crowds in Bengal, Maharashtra, and Punjab sang it during processions despite warnings. As per accounts noted by later historians, many freedom fighters carried the words on slips of folded paper inside their clothes. They said it gave them strength. During this period, I often reminded my readers in my writings: *The Motherland is our only mother. Our motherland is higher than heaven...All we have is the Mother.*

Youth that found its identity

Years later, Rabindranath Tagore carried the song into a different realm. At the 1896 session of the Indian National Congress, he gave it a musical form that allowed the words to travel farther. Around the same time, he would later compose *Jana Gana Mana*, which eventually became the National Anthem. Together these two works shaped the soundscape of India's awakening. *Vande Mataram* grew into a cultural symbol. In 1907, Madam Bhikaji Cama unfurled the first tricolour flag on foreign soil

in Stuttgart, the words *Vande Mataram* emblazoned across it like a promise. Two years later, Madan Lal Dhingra uttered the same salutation before his execution in 1909, making it immortal. The song became a part of everyday life as well. School assemblies adopted its opening lines. Public readings, theatre performances, folk recitations, and political marches echoed it. It had become India's unofficial chorus.

Adulthood that carried the legacy

Songs evolve as nations grow. After Tagore's rendition, many musicians brought their own spirit to *Vande Mataram*. The modern world encountered it again with AR Rahman's 1997 version, blending classical and contemporary expression. His interpretation reached a younger India, turning the song into something people hummed during journeys, celebrations, and national festivals. It became an emotional expression rather than only a ceremonial one. Today, *Vande Mataram* carries different meanings for different generations. It is a greeting to the land, a reminder of resilience, or simply a moment to pause and recognise identity in a fast-moving world. Its timelessness en-

dures because every Indian can find a little bit of themselves in its words.

Grand old age of 150 years

As you celebrate 150 years of *Vande Mataram*, India opens her doors to a year of remembrance. The celebrations began in New Delhi, where the Prime Minister inaugurated the nationwide commemoration with a special coin and postage stamp, followed by a grand concert of 75 musicians. To ensure that the anniversary is remembered in many voices - not just official ones - a digital portal has also been established, inviting people to submit their own recordings to create a living archive. The theme has been adopted in various ways by educational and cultural institutions throughout India in the form of art exhibits, musical performances, and public readings. State Governments, too, held their own events. In Gangtok, Hyderabad, Visakhapatnam, and Chandigarh, people gathered to sing the full song together - just as earlier generations once did during protests and marches. Through these nationwide celebrations, India reminds itself that *Vande Mataram* is not merely a relic of the freedom struggle but a living inheritance.

With enduring faith in you,
Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay

