



Revisiting Early Revolutionary Nationalism: The Anushilan Samiti and The Emergence of Organised Militancy in Colonial India

Ankit Das¹

Research Scholar (History), Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur (C.G.)

E-mail: ankitdas29464@gmail.com

Dr. Shampa Chaubey²

Retd. Principal, Late Ramprasad Dewangan Govt. College, Kharora, Raipur (C.G.)

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22082373>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 22-06-2026

Accepted: 15-07-2026

Published: 20-08-2026

Keywords:

Aurobindo, Anushilan Samiti, Bengal, Militant, Nationalism, Revolutionaries

ABSTRACT

The Anushilan Samiti's emergence in the early 20th century marked a key shift in Indian revolutionary nationalism. While earlier resistance involved isolated acts of violence, conspiracies, and patriotic acts, these lacked coherence, organisation, and strategy. The Samiti changed this by creating a disciplined framework that included political education, physical training, covert operations, and ideological dedication. This paper explores the transition from sporadic resistance to organised militancy, highlighting the Samiti's goals and ideology. It shows that the organisation was more than a secret society; it represented a new form of militant nationalism based on disciplined action, sacrifice, and national renewal. By placing the Samiti in the broader political and intellectual context of late 19th- and early 20th-century India, the paper argues that it laid the groundwork for future revolutionary groups. Ultimately, the Samiti helped shape revolutionary nationalism into a sustainable political movement that influenced India's fight against colonial rule.

Disclaimer: The opinions, interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, analyses, and statements expressed in this research article are solely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views, policies, or positions of the Publisher, Chief Editor, Editors, Editorial Board, Reviewers, or their affiliated institutions. The author(s) are solely responsible for ensuring the originality, authenticity, and integrity of the manuscript and for ensuring that it is free from plagiarism, AI-generated content, copyright infringement, data falsification, and any other form of academic misconduct.



Introduction

The struggle for India's independence was characterised by a diversity of political ideologies and methods that evolved in response to changing colonial policies and nationalist aspirations. While constitutional politics and mass movements have traditionally occupied the centre of nationalist historiography, the revolutionary movement emerged as a parallel current that sought political liberation through organised resistance against colonial authority. Within this broader tradition, the establishment of the Anushilan Samiti in Bengal during the early twentieth century represented a watershed in the development of revolutionary nationalism. It signified the transition from scattered, sporadic acts of resistance to a disciplined and ideologically motivated revolutionary organisation capable of sustaining militant anti-colonial activities over an extended period.

The origins of revolutionary resistance in colonial India preceded the formation of organised revolutionary societies. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, dissatisfaction with British rule manifested itself in a series of isolated incidents involving individuals or small groups motivated by patriotic sentiment and regional grievances. The activities of Vasudev Balwant Phadke during the 1870s, the assassination of the plague commissioner of Pune, Charles Rand, by the Chapekar brothers in 1897, and several local conspiracies reflected an emerging willingness among sections of Indian youth to challenge imperial authority through direct action. However, these efforts remained geographically confined, organisationally fragmented, and strategically limited. They lacked a permanent institutional structure capable of recruiting members, disseminating revolutionary ideas, coordinating activities, or ensuring ideological continuity across regions and generations.

The closing decades of the nineteenth century witnessed profound political and intellectual transformations that fundamentally altered the character of Indian nationalism. The limitations of constitutional agitation, repeated administrative repression, racial discrimination, economic exploitation, and the perceived failure of moderate politics generated increasing frustration among educated Indians. Simultaneously, a powerful cultural renaissance in Bengal and other parts of India contributed to the emergence of a more assertive conception of nationalism. International developments further expanded the ideological horizons of Indian revolutionaries. The transnational influences did not merely inspire imitation but were selectively adapted to Indian conditions, resulting in the synthesis of indigenous cultural nationalism with modern revolutionary organisational principles. Consequently, revolutionary nationalism evolved beyond spontaneous patriotic violence into a consciously constructed political ideology advocating organised resistance as a legitimate means of national liberation.



This paper seeks to address that historiographical gap by investigating the Anushilan Samiti as the critical link between earlier forms of individual resistance and the emergence of organised revolutionary nationalism in India. The emphasis is therefore placed upon the processes through which revolutionary activism acquired coherence, continuity, and political purpose.

From Sporadic Resistance to the Birth of the Anushilan Samiti

The emergence of the Anushilan Samiti marked the culmination of a gradual transformation in the character of anti-colonial resistance that had unfolded in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Before the establishment of organised revolutionary societies, resistance to British rule largely consisted of sporadic acts of defiance by individuals or small groups, driven by patriotic sentiment, local grievances, or personal conviction.

Among the earliest manifestations of militant nationalism was the movement led by Vasudev Balwant Phadke in western India in the 1870s. Phadke sought to organise armed bands to challenge colonial authority and mobilised sections of the rural population against the British administration.¹ Although his movement was swiftly suppressed, it introduced the idea that political liberation might require confrontation with colonial power rather than reliance on constitutional petitions alone. Yet Phadke's efforts remained regionally confined and failed to establish a permanent revolutionary organisation capable of sustaining resistance beyond his personal leadership.

Similarly, the assassination of W. C. Rand, the Plague Commissioner of Poona, by the Chapekar brothers in 1897 reflected the growing radicalisation of nationalist sentiment. The incident stemmed from widespread resentment of the humiliating plague measures imposed by the colonial administration.² While the assassination inspired many young nationalists by demonstrating the possibility of individual resistance, it remained essentially an isolated act of political retaliation. No organisational mechanism existed to transform such expressions of patriotism into a sustained revolutionary movement.

These early episodes illustrate the limitations of sporadic resistance. They were characterised by local initiative, dependence on charismatic individuals, and the absence of systematic recruitment, ideological training, or long-term planning. Each act of resistance ended with the arrest or execution of its participants, preventing continuity between successive generations of revolutionaries. Consequently, revolutionary activity remained episodic rather than institutionalised.

The closing decades of the nineteenth century witnessed profound changes in the intellectual and political climate of India that encouraged the search for more organised forms of resistance. The emergence of an



educated middle class under colonial education produced a generation increasingly conscious of racial discrimination, economic exploitation, and political exclusion.³ Simultaneously, the limitations of the moderate leadership within the Indian National Congress became increasingly apparent to politically conscious youth. Constitutional methods, petitions, and appeals to British liberalism appeared incapable of securing meaningful political concessions.⁴

Alongside these political developments, the cultural renaissance centred in Bengal fostered a renewed conception of the Indian nation, grounded in historical memory, cultural pride, and moral regeneration. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's writings played a particularly significant role in this transformation. Through works such as *Anandamath* and the hymn *Vande Mataram*, Bankim transformed the abstract idea of the nation into a sacred moral entity deserving absolute devotion. His conception of the Motherland provided revolutionary nationalism with a powerful emotional and symbolic vocabulary that transcended provincial identities.⁵

Swami Vivekananda further deepened this intellectual transformation by advocating strength, fearlessness, discipline, and service to the nation. Although Vivekananda did not advocate political violence, his insistence on character-building and national regeneration profoundly influenced many young Bengalis who later joined revolutionary organisations. His reinterpretation of Hindu philosophy emphasised courage and self-confidence rather than passive resignation, thereby fostering an ethical climate receptive to militant nationalism.⁶

Sri Aurobindo contributed another crucial dimension by articulating a political philosophy that rejected dependence upon colonial constitutionalism. Through his writings in *Bande Mataram* and other nationalist journals, Aurobindo argued that national freedom was an inalienable right rather than a concession to be granted by imperial authorities. He regarded political action as a moral obligation and emphasised sacrifice, discipline, and complete independence (*Purna Swaraj*) long before it became the official objective of the Indian National Congress.⁷ His political thought supplied revolutionary nationalism with a coherent ideological justification that extended beyond emotional patriotism.

Global influences also shaped the intellectual development of Indian revolutionary nationalism. The unification of Italy under Giuseppe Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi demonstrated the effectiveness of secret revolutionary organisations committed to national liberation. Mazzini's concept of duty, sacrifice, and disciplined organisation resonated deeply with Indian nationalists, many of whom regarded his writings as manuals for political action.⁸ Similarly, the Irish nationalist struggle illustrated the possibilities of organised



resistance against a powerful imperial state, while Russian revolutionary groups provided examples of clandestine organisation, conspiratorial methods, and political commitment.⁹

Indian revolutionaries did not imitate these foreign models mechanically. Rather, they selectively adapted them to Indian conditions by combining Western revolutionary techniques with indigenous cultural and spiritual traditions. This synthesis distinguished Indian revolutionary nationalism from contemporary European movements. The objective was not merely the overthrow of colonial rule but the moral and national regeneration of Indian society through disciplined collective action.

It was within this changing intellectual and political environment that the Anushilan Samiti emerged in Bengal on 24 March 1902 in Calcutta under the leadership of Pramathanath Mitra, who is widely recognised as its principal founder. A barrister by profession, Mitra provided the institutional framework, legal guidance, financial support, and organisational discipline necessary to establish the Samiti. Satish Chandra Basu, who had already initiated a physical culture association inspired by the ideals of national regeneration, played a pivotal role in organising young recruits and developing the Samiti's early structure. Jatindranath Banerjee (later Niralamba Swami), who had military training and had been sent by Sri Aurobindo from Baroda to Bengal, further strengthened the organisation by introducing systematic physical training and secret methods of recruitment. Together, these individuals transformed scattered physical culture clubs into a disciplined revolutionary organisation.¹⁰ The name "Anushilan" was inspired by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's concept of Anushilan Tattva, meaning disciplined physical, moral, and intellectual cultivation. Although not the formal founder, Sri Aurobindo was the chief ideological architect of the early revolutionary movement.

Unlike previous revolutionary efforts, the Anushilan Samiti established an institutional framework capable of ensuring continuity. Initially organised under the appearance of physical culture clubs, the Samiti combined physical training with political education, moral discipline, and secret organisational practices. Physical exercise was not pursued merely for bodily fitness but as preparation for national service. The cultivation of strength, self-control, and sacrifice became integral components of revolutionary training. The body itself became an instrument of national service, reflecting the influence of Swami Vivekananda's emphasis on strength and self-confidence as essential prerequisites for national regeneration. Physical training thus acquired ideological significance, linking personal self-improvement with the larger objective of political liberation. This represented a significant departure from earlier patterns of resistance, which had relied primarily upon individual initiative and spontaneous action. Membership involved ideological instruction, organisational discipline, and adherence to strict codes of secrecy. Recruitment increasingly



targeted educated youth, particularly students, who were expected to combine intellectual preparation with physical training. The organisation thereby transformed revolutionary activity into a systematic political vocation rather than a series of isolated heroic acts.¹¹

The Partition of Bengal in 1905 accelerated this process dramatically. The widespread public opposition generated by the partition expanded the social base of militant nationalism and provided the Anushilan Samiti with favourable conditions for organisational growth. The Swadeshi Movement enabled revolutionary activists to recruit volunteers, establish local branches, disseminate nationalist literature, and strengthen clandestine networks beneath the broader framework of anti-partition agitation.¹² Organised militancy thus evolved alongside mass political mobilisation rather than independently of it.

Violence was no longer conceived as isolated retaliation against colonial oppression but as one component of a broader revolutionary strategy aimed at national emancipation. Political assassinations, the procurement of arms, bomb manufacturing, and military training were integrated into an organised framework guided by ideological objectives rather than individual impulses. This strategic orientation distinguished the Samiti from earlier sporadic acts of resistance and established a model subsequently adopted by revolutionary organisations throughout India.

Consequently, the birth of the Anushilan Samiti should be understood not merely as the formation of another secret society but as the beginning of a new phase in the evolution of Indian revolutionary nationalism. It represented the point at which anti-colonial militancy acquired permanence, institutional structure, and ideological coherence, thereby fundamentally altering the trajectory of the revolutionary movement in colonial India.

The Anushilan Samiti and the Institutionalisation of Organised Revolutionary Nationalism

One of the most significant contributions of the Anushilan Samiti was transforming revolutionary activism from an individual act of patriotic defiance into a collective political enterprise. The Anushilan Samiti addressed the fundamental limitation of revolutionary nationalism by establishing a disciplined organisation in which individuals became part of a larger revolutionary network rather than acting independently.

The organisational philosophy of the Samiti reflected a conscious recognition that successful anti-colonial resistance required systematic preparation rather than spontaneous emotional reaction. In Bhawani Mandir, it states that India is to be reborn spiritually, and it defines nation as:



For what is a nation? What is our mother-country? It is not a piece of earth, nor a figure of speech, nor a fiction of the mind. It is a mighty Shakti, composed of the Shaktis of all the millions of units that make up the nation, just as Bhawani Mahisha-Mardini sprang into being from the Shaktis of all the millions of gods assembled in one mass of force and welded into unity. The Shakti we call India, Bhawani Bharati, is the living unity of the Shaktis of three hundred millions of people; but she is inactive, imprisoned in the magic circle of *tamas*, the self-indulgent inertia and ignorance of her sons. To get rid of *tamas* we have but to wake the Brahma within.¹³

Equally important was the emphasis placed upon ideological education. The leaders of the Anushilan Samiti recognised that revolutionary commitment could not be sustained through emotional patriotism alone. Members were encouraged to study the writings of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Giuseppe Mazzini, and other nationalist thinkers whose ideas provided philosophical justification for revolutionary action. Through this process, nationalism was transformed from a sentiment into a disciplined political belief grounded in moral obligation, sacrifice, and service to the nation. Revolutionary violence was consequently understood not as an end in itself but as one instrument within a broader struggle for national emancipation.¹⁴

The oath administered to members symbolised this ideological commitment. Admission into the organisation involved solemn pledges of secrecy, discipline, and complete devotion to the cause of national liberation. Such rituals served practical organisational purposes by protecting clandestine operations while simultaneously reinforcing psychological commitment among members. Loyalty shifted from personal associations towards the revolutionary organisation itself, enabling the Samiti to maintain cohesion despite continuous colonial surveillance and repression.¹⁵

Another distinctive feature of the Anushilan Samiti was its decentralised yet coordinated organisational structure. Rather than functioning as a single centralised body vulnerable to police infiltration, the organisation developed numerous local branches connected through trusted intermediaries. This cellular structure reduced the risk of complete organisational collapse following arrests and enabled revolutionary activity to continue despite repeated government crackdowns.¹⁶ The organisational resilience demonstrated by the Samiti later became characteristic of several revolutionary organisations across India.

The revolutionary programme of the Anushilan Samiti extended beyond political assassination, although such actions attracted the greatest attention from colonial authorities. Members engaged in systematic military preparation, including firearms training, bomb manufacture, intelligence gathering, secure communication, and the procurement of arms. These activities reflected careful planning rather than



sporadic retaliation. Political violence was integrated into a broader revolutionary strategy intended to weaken colonial authority, inspire nationalist sentiment, and prepare for future armed struggle. In this respect, the Samiti differed fundamentally from earlier acts of isolated resistance that lacked strategic coordination.¹⁷

The publication and circulation of revolutionary literature constituted another important dimension of the organisation's activities. Newspapers such as *Bande Mataram* and *Jugantar* disseminated nationalist ideas, criticised colonial rule, and encouraged political activism among educated youth. Pamphlets, translations of European revolutionary writings, and discussions of historical struggles for national liberation created an intellectual environment favourable to militant nationalism. Revolutionary literature functioned simultaneously as political education, ideological recruitment, and psychological mobilisation.¹⁸ The pen and the pistol were therefore regarded as complementary instruments within the revolutionary struggle.

The ideological framework of the Anushilan Samiti represented a synthesis of indigenous and international influences. The concept of the nation as the Motherland, derived largely from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, endowed nationalism with profound emotional and spiritual significance. Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of strength and character-building emphasised the moral regeneration necessary for political freedom. Sri Aurobindo transformed these cultural ideas into an explicitly political doctrine by arguing that complete independence was both a national right and a spiritual duty. Simultaneously, the writings of Giuseppe Mazzini introduced concepts of disciplined revolutionary organisation, sacrifice, and collective responsibility, while Irish and Russian revolutionary experiences demonstrated practical methods of clandestine political action.¹⁹ The Anushilan Samiti did not merely imitate foreign revolutionary movements; instead, it adapted their organisational principles to the cultural and political realities of colonial India.

The organisation also helped redefine the ethical basis of revolutionary politics. Personal sacrifice, discipline, collective responsibility, and complete dedication to national liberation became defining characteristics of revolutionary nationalism. Martyrdom was interpreted not as individual heroism alone but as a conscious political act intended to inspire future generations. This ethical transformation distinguished organised revolutionary nationalism from earlier spontaneous resistance, where personal courage often overshadowed collective political strategy.

The Partition of Bengal in 1905 significantly expanded the organisation's influence. The widespread public resentment generated by the partition created favourable conditions for recruitment and political mobilisation. The Swadeshi Movement enabled the Anushilan Samiti to extend its organisational networks



under the cover of boycott campaigns, national education initiatives, and volunteer organisations. Consequently, revolutionary nationalism developed in close interaction with broader nationalist politics rather than in isolation from it. Many young activists moved between public political agitation and clandestine revolutionary activity, illustrating the fluid boundaries that existed within the nationalist movement during this period.

The colonial administration interpreted these developments primarily through the language of conspiracy and terrorism. Increasing surveillance, preventive detention, censorship, and prosecutions under special legislation reflected official recognition that revolutionary organisations had acquired unprecedented organisational sophistication. Events such as the Alipore Bomb Case (1908) exposed the extent of the revolutionary network. They demonstrated that the British Government confronted not isolated criminals but a disciplined political organisation motivated by a coherent nationalist ideology. Ironically, the very scale of colonial repression testified to the effectiveness of the organisational innovations introduced by the Anushilan Samiti.

Conclusion

The evolution of revolutionary nationalism in colonial India requires an examination of the organisational and ideological processes that transformed isolated expressions of anti-colonial resistance into a coherent political movement. The Anushilan Samiti occupies a pivotal position within this historical transformation because it institutionalised revolutionary nationalism by combining ideological commitment, organisational discipline, and strategic planning within a permanent revolutionary framework. Before its emergence, revolutionary resistance was largely characterised by sporadic acts of defiance undertaken by individuals or small groups reacting to specific instances of colonial oppression. The organisation introduced a new model of anti-colonial politics in which individual sacrifice was subordinated to collective national objectives. The establishment of the Anushilan Samiti created an organisation capable of preserving revolutionary traditions across successive generations of activists.

The significance of the Anushilan Samiti lay not simply in its adoption of militant methods but in its successful integration of ideology and organisation. Revolutionary violence was no longer conceived as spontaneous retaliation against colonial authority but as one element within a carefully constructed political strategy aimed at national liberation.

Equally important was the Samiti's ability to synthesise diverse intellectual influences into a distinctly Indian conception of revolutionary nationalism. Indigenous traditions represented by Bankim Chandra



Chattopadhyay, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo provided the ethical and cultural foundations of militant nationalism. At the same time, international experiences—including the Italian Risorgimento, Irish republicanism, and Russian revolutionary movements—offered organisational models and strategic insights. Rather than mechanically imitating foreign revolutionary traditions, the Anushilan Samiti adapted these influences to the socio-political realities of colonial India, producing a revolutionary ideology rooted simultaneously in cultural nationalism and modern political organisation.

The legacy of the organisation extended well beyond Bengal. Its organisational principles, methods of recruitment, clandestine networks, and emphasis on ideological commitment influenced subsequent revolutionary bodies such as the Jugantar group, the Hindustan Republican Association, and later the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. Although these organisations modified their ideological orientations in response to changing political circumstances, the institutional foundations established by the Anushilan Samiti continued to shape the revolutionary movement throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In this respect, the Samiti should be regarded not merely as one revolutionary organisation among many but as the foundational institution that redefined the organisational character of revolutionary nationalism in India.

Finally, the Anushilan Samiti occupies an important place in the broader history of anti-colonial movements because the transition from sporadic resistance to organised militancy was not merely an evolution of revolutionary tactics; it enabled revolutionary nationalism to emerge as a sustained and influential current within India's freedom struggle and represented the maturation of revolutionary nationalism into a coherent political tradition whose influence extended far beyond its own historical moment.

References:

1. Majumdar, R. C. (1962). *History of the Freedom Movement in India* (Vol. 1). Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, pp. 396–399.
2. Chapekar, D. H. (1910). *Autobiography of Damodar Hari Chapekar*. Bombay Police Abstracts, pp. 50–107.
3. Desai, A. R. (1966). *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, pp. 180–183.
4. Chandra, B. (1989). *India's Struggle for Independence, 1857–1947*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, pp. 135–137.



5. Chatterjee, B. (2005). *Anandamath*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1882)
6. Heehs, P. (2013). *Roots, Branches, and Seeds: The Teachings of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo Examined in the Light of Indian Tradition, Colonial Modernity and One Another*. New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Occasional Paper No. 14.
7. Ibid.; Aurobindo, S. (1950). *Bande Mataram: Early Political Writings*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
8. Heehs, P. (1993). Terrorism in India during the freedom struggle. *The Historian*, 55(3), 469–482.
9. Ibid.
10. Government of India. (1918). *Sedition Committee Report, 1918 (Rowlatt Committee Report)*. Government of India Press, pp. 15–25.
11. Majumdar, R. C. (1962). *History of the Freedom Movement in India* (Vol. 2). Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, pp. 267–269.
12. Sarkar, S. (2018). *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908*. Pearson, pp. 124–126.
13. Aurobindo, S. (1905). *Bhawani Mandir* [Pamphlet].
14. Majumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. I, pp. 404–410.
15. Ker, J. C. (1973). *Political Trouble in India, 1907–17*. Delhi: Oriental Publishers, pp. 142–147.
16. Heehs, P. (1992). The Maniktala secret society: An early Bengali terrorist group. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 29(3), 349–370.
17. Bhattacharya, A. C. (1907). *Vartaman rananiti*.; Mukti kon pathe? (1907).
18. Ker, *Political Trouble in India, 1907–17*, pp. 62–120.
19. Mukherjee, A. (1995). Revolutionary nationalist activities in Bengal (1902–1913). In A. Mukherjee (Ed.), *Militant Nationalism in India, 1876–1947* (pp. 57–98). Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies.