

Notions of Nationhood in Bengal: Perspectives on Samaj, 1867–1905,¹

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This paper explores and re-defines notions of nationhood as reflected in the Bengali literati's expressions of an empowered identity in tracts, pamphlets and articles in periodicals during the late colonial period. It shifts the focus from existing assumptions of the nation as an artefact of modernity² by demonstrating that though ideas about nationhood acquired a coherent and articulated form in the late nineteenth century, its roots are to be traced back to the pre-modern era. By interrogating the relatively unexplored conceptual category of *samaj* (social collectivity) deployed by the literati, this essay demonstrates how a connection was forged between the modern nation and the historical community from whence it emerged. Ideas about nationhood articulated by the literati had indigenous origins, which were oriented to a tradition of a shared world of values and conduct. In highlighting such origins I seek to qualify existing academic models that regard colonial nationalisms as 'borrowed'³ or 'derivative',⁴ and

¹ This paper draws on one of the central themes of my Ph.D. thesis entitled 'Samaj and Unity: The Bengali Literati's Discourse on Nationhood, 1867–1905' (SOAS, University of London, 2004). I have greatly benefited from the suggestions of my supervisor Professor Peter Robb.

² Echoing Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner, later writers have seen the nation as a product of modernity. For Anderson, the critical moment of transformation consisted in a fundamental change in modes of apprehending the world, resulting from the coalition of Protestantism and print capitalism, which made it possible to imagine the nation. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983), pp. 28, 46; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983); and Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World. A Derivative Discourse?* (Princeton, 1986).

³ Benedict Anderson has viewed nationalism as modular, which makes it possible to transplant it to a great variety of social terrains. It can merge with various political and ideological constellations. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

⁴ See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. According to Partha Chatterjee, colonial middle classes adopt the enlightenment world-view through education and their views become echoes of dominant western political

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stress the tremendous difficulty in transcending western paradigms. The notion of a nation in colonial Bengal was produced through a complex interaction between re-orientations of indigenous ideas of past unities and the historical circumstances of the modern period. The latter included influences emanating from the late colonial situation, specifically the development of print technologies and the emergence of a civil society in India after 1800.⁵

The 1860s, in particular, constituted a turning point in ways of articulating and disseminating ideas. The context for the literati's discourse on nationhood was the catalytic concatenation of the aftermath of the Mutiny-Rebellion of 1857, the Ilbert Bill Controversy (1883) and colonial sociology. Existing patterns of interaction between the ruler and the ruled underwent changes, leading to new ways of rethinking the self that enmeshed in the cultural-nationalist agenda of the Hindu Mela (1867). The definition of the nation as a cultural entity⁶ historically rooted in the evolution of *samaj* involves a shift from theoretical imaginings influenced by Saidian perspectives that see the nation through a political prism subject to the overwhelming sway of the state.⁷ Such positions de-link nationhood from culture and counterpoise community and fragmentation to the modern political nation state. To claim a primacy for the discourse on cultural nationalism is not to deny the existence of other, admittedly more

discourses. Such a position ignores the fact that not all aspects of colonial power knowledge were accepted. Moreover, Chatterjee's emphasis on the overwhelming sway of the state makes culture co-extensive with politics. Colonial-Western cultural hegemony is thus homogenised, all-pervasive and irresistible within its own domain, and seen as being without internal tensions. Those touched by it become capable only of derivative discourses. Resistance is relegated to pre-colonial community consciousness. But this essay has sought to show that *samaj* was not merely an ur-traditional relic. Pre-colonial *samajik* unities were reoriented in the modern period and related to *samaj* as an experiential reality or an idea-in-practice.

⁵ See Rajat Kanta Ray, *Exploring Emotional History. Gender, Mentality and Literature in the Indian Awakening* (New Delhi, 2001), p. 33; and Sudipta Kaviraj, 'In Search Of Civil Society', in Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (eds), *Civil Society. History and Possibilities* (New Delhi, 2002), pp. 307–9.

⁶ The development of cultural identity pivoted around this conception of nationhood was underpinned by theoretical perspectives of romantic nationalism of the type discussed by Herder. This has been mentioned by Sumit Sarkar. See Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (New Delhi, 1997), p. 22. Also see Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 4 Volumes (Riga, 1784–1791), translated by T.O. Churchill as *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* (London, 1800, 1803).

⁷ See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, in *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus* (Delhi, 1999), p. 112.

political discourses. I argue, however, that during the period 1867–1905,⁸ the conceptualisation of nationhood in terms of culture was a major trajectory in rethinking identity. While recent studies recording shifts from political and modernist definitions of nationhood have focused on India as a whole,⁹ this essay traces, through a case study of Bengal, the continuities and changes linked to fusions of tradition and modernity in the imagining of nationhood.

Movements concerned with identity and nationhood (especially in the nineteenth century) were not peculiar to Bengal. Stirrings of identity closely connected to ‘conceptual realms’ of past patriotisms¹⁰ were felt in India, Europe and South East Asia. Patriotism, race and historical memory were some of the conceptual links through which present identities were related to the past. However, the degree of rooted-ness of modern notions of identity in the past differed in countries within and beyond Europe. In England and France, more centralised state systems eroded local particularisms and patriotisms, whereas in colonised agrarian societies like India, the link between old patriotism and modern nationalism was clearer.¹¹ In China, Vietnam and Japan, race,¹² old, ethnic patriotism, and territorial sovereignty were reworked in an anti-alien and political platform.¹³ Significantly, nationalist discourses and identity issues in late nineteenth-century Japan followed the European

⁸ As this essay focuses on conceptions of nationhood grounded in culture rather than politics, its outer limit is 1905 when political action crystallised in the Swadeshi Movement.

⁹ See C.A. Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia. Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India* (New Delhi, 1998, 2001); Rajat Kanta Ray, *The Felt Community. Commonalty and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (Delhi, 2003); and Prasenjit Duara, ‘On Theories of Nationalism for India and China’, in Tan Chung (ed.), *In the Footsteps of Xuanzang: Tan Yun-Shan and India* (Delhi, 1999).

¹⁰ Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia*, p. 2.

¹¹ The situation in India was in a sense analogous to that in Germany and Italy where looser state systems fostered the growth of cultural realms defined by language and civilisation. This was the background to an energised nationalism that interacted with the unifying force of nineteenth-century capitalism and European rivalries. See Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia*, p. 19.

¹² According to Frank Dikotter the idea of racial unity played a major role in shaping identity in China at the close of the nineteenth century. See Frank Dikotter, ‘The Idea of “Race” in Modern China’, in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds), *Ethnicity* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 245–6.

¹³ Vietnamese nationalism had an overt political and xenophobic content, which drew from past examples of resisting foreigners. For details see Thomas Hodgkin, *Vietnam. The Revolutionary Past* (London, 1981), p. 166. This has been referred to by Rajat Kanta Ray. See Ray, *The Felt Community*, p. 20.

post-Enlightenment, rationalist, evolutionary and linear trajectory. The production of the idea of *toyoshi*,¹⁴ emphasising territorial sovereignty and bounded-ness, 'allowed the new nation state to write its history as an enlightened modern nation,' and also as a culture rooted in a great Asiatic tradition that could challenge western claims of superiority.¹⁵ The situation in India was different in two main ways. First, identity in India remained rooted in a plural culture that did not always have an overt political texture. Second, re-articulations of identity in India (as the present case study of Bengal would show) could not be un-problematically fitted into the post-Enlightenment, western-rationalist, 'derivative' paradigm. Within India too, there were subtle variations. Identity debates in Maharashtra reworked notions of *swadeshbhimān* and *deshbhakti* implying rooted-ness to a particular territory, which drew from Shivaji's memorialisation of the Maratha homeland.¹⁶ The notion of the Tamil *inam* also came to imply a geographical unit of language.¹⁷ In Bengal, however, the idea of an ordered and harmonious society as the basis of unity had more fluid territorial connotations that could ideologically transcend local and regional boundaries to approximate the nation.

Meaning of *Samaj*

Attempts to illuminate links between notions of nationhood in late colonial Bengal, and pre-colonial community sentiment are naturally connected to the meaning of *samaj*. Etymologically meaning 'to move together, in a united manner',¹⁸ *samaj* could variously refer to aggregate, collectivity of individuals, union of castes, or people of a specific region. It was therefore an umbrella-like concept that could accommodate different families, *jatis*,¹⁹ castes, and regions under its

¹⁴ See Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (Berkeley, 1993), mentioned by Prasenjit Duara, 'Postcolonial History', in Sarah Maza and Lloyd Kramer (eds), *A Companion to Western Historical Thought* (Malden, Massachusetts, 2002), p. 420.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia*, pp. 3–4, 24–6.

¹⁷ See Dagmar Hellman-Rajanayagam, 'Is there a Tamil "Race"?' in Peter Robb (ed.), *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (Delhi, 1995), p. 118.

¹⁸ Sailendra Biswas, Shashibhushan Dasgupta and Dineshchandra Bhattacharya, *Sangsad Bangla Abhidhan* (reprinted Calcutta, 1978), p. 816.

¹⁹ *Jati* was a multifaceted term, which could variously mean species, tribe, race, caste and nation. By the 1850s, *jati* had become admittedly multi-functional.

rubric by forging a network of linkages. The notion of *samaj* was grounded in two main elements. First was the familial nucleus, from which developed feelings of *atmiyata*, signifying relationship between blood relatives as well as non-relatives, friends and acquaintances. *Samaj* implicitly contained the notion of *atmiya sajan*. Unlike the western counterpart of this term (kith and kin), *atmiya sajan* literally meant 'one's own people'. It implied not only blood relatives and individuals related by marriage, but also people related by living together in the same house, neighbourhood, village, or by being members of the same school class, by working in the same office, by taking instruction from the same guru, and by going to a pilgrimage together. This idea endowed the indigenous notion of family with an open-ended, and continually incorporating character, moving from the immediate blood relatives, to family in the wider sense, or lineage, to distant relatives, and to *atmiya sajan* unrelated by blood.²⁰ Second, *samaj* had a regulatory role. It regulated the individual and the social group according to certain specific norms, codes of morality, and rules. Rabindranath Tagore believed that *samaj* was a social and moral regulator,²¹ and could settle discord through mediation. The literati resolved the basic opposition between the individual and the social community by emphasising that *samaj* existed for the individuals, and the latter were not subordinated to it. Haraprasad Shastri explained: '*Samaj* is an institution created for the good of the individual. Individuals cannot become subordinated to something that they have themselves created.'²²

A tension, however, remained between the individual and the *samaj*, which came to the fore especially in the 1820s and 1830s due to the new message of Rammohun Ray's Brahmo faith, the spread of western education, and John Stuart Mill's liberalism. Rachel Van M. Baumer has pointed out that during the first decades of the nineteenth century, in the literati's reinterpretation of *dharma*,²³ while moral social behaviour and individual responsibility remained strong and

²⁰ See Ronald B. Inden and Ralph B. Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali Culture* (Chicago, London, 1977), pp. 3–6.

²¹ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Brahman', *Bangadarshan* (Ashar, 1902) printed in Satyendranath Ray (ed.), *Rabindranather Chintajagat, Samajchinta* (Calcutta, 1985), p. 89.

²² Satyanarayan Das, *Bangadarshan O Bangalir Manan Sadhana* (Calcutta, 1974), p. 48.

²³ *Dharma* implied a righteous life and a set of duties and responsibilities to the family, society and community. Its meaning is discussed in detail below.

personal, individual action and sense of social involvement underwent a change. Men were obligated to act toward other men in a way they themselves wished to be treated. They were to respond to other men's needs with compassion and sympathy.²⁴ These changes fed into the literati's re-evaluation of the relationship between the individual and the *samaj*. There were simultaneous attempts to prioritise the *samaj* over the individual, as well as harmonise them. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay in his *Dharmatattva* attempted to mediate between the elevation of *samaj* above the individual.²⁵

These mediations redefined identity by envisioning *samaj* as a focus of familial and social linkages, and as an embodiment of an enduring idea of righteous life grounded in moral principles and codes of social behaviour. My concern here is to illuminate specific ideas of the literati with regard to *samaj* and how these subsumed unity. A methodological approach involving perspectives of social and intellectual history²⁶ is used to study interconnections between texts, and among the literati. This is helpful in mapping ideological rendezvous despite internal variations among the literati,²⁷ and in tracing links between texts on the one hand, and belief and practice on the other. The ideological linkages situated in a historical framework help demonstrate how past unities were re-oriented to the present. To the literati, the past *samajs* of Bengal, for instance, caste and sub-regional *samajs*, had certain *Gemeinschaft*-like qualities, such as kinship, territory, language and

²⁴ Rachel Van M. Baumer, 'The Reinterpretation of *Dharma* in Nineteenth Century Bengal: Righteous Conduct for Man in the Modern World', in Rachel Van M. Baumer (ed.), *Aspects of Bengali History and Society* (Hawaii, 1875), p. 89.

²⁵ Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, *Dharmatattva*, 24th Adhyay in Jogesh Chandra Bagal (ed.), *Bankim Rachanabali*, Volume II (Calcutta, 1965).

²⁶ The perspective of intellectual history attempts to trace the history of the literati's ideas, situate them in the social and political context and explore the linkages they had with language and communications. The viewpoint of social history considers and assesses the social world of the literati, their customs and manners, and ideas about conduct reflected in their prioritisation of cultural Aryanism. The social history perspective is also implicated in the process by which the literati defined its relation to others such as contiguous ethnicities and 'lower orders' within Bengal.

²⁷ The literati encompassed a multilayered social group including landed aristocrats, professionals, and even poor but educated and respected folk. There were internal social and familial, as well as ideological differences. Though this group broadly signified the middle class (*madhyabitta*), it intersected with categories such as 'elite' and '*bhadralok*'. For details about such intersections see John Mc Guire, *The Making of the Colonial Mind* (Canberra, 1983), pp. 2, 120; and S.N. Mukherjee, 'Class, Caste and Politics in Calcutta', in S. N. Mukherjee and E. Leach (eds), *Elites in South Asia* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 34.

culture.²⁸ They were not societies of atomised individuals. The literati re-oriented the primordial sentiments seen as embedded in past *samajs* in the nineteenth century. More significantly, they projected feelings of *atmiyata* even in social relationships in a civil society in nineteenth-century Bengal. This demonstrates that the literati's re-imagination of unity within the conceptual framework of *samaj* was not grounded in iconic oppositions of *Gemeinschaft*/*Gesellschaft* or traditional/modern.²⁹

The Ideological Basis of *Samaj*: *Dharma*

The idea of *samajik* (social) unity in terms of radiating oneness from the familial nucleus was deeply rooted in *dharma*, the ideological basis and the welding force of *samaj*. *Samajik* unity rethought in terms of *dharma* presupposed a divide between indigenous and western/European society. Though these divisions had not crystallised into clear-cut stereotypes, a search for cultural identity in a colonial climate of subjugation needed a framework of distinction. The literati identified *dharma* as embodying the 'unique' nature of indigenous society differentiating it from the West. The state-centric character of the latter was contrasted with *dharma*, defined as righteous life, a set of duties and responsibilities to the family, society and community.³⁰ Reinterpreted in late nineteenth-century Bengal,

²⁸ For an elaboration of *Gemeinschaft* ties in the Indian context, see Carol Upadhyay, 'The Concept of Community in Indian Social Sciences, An Anthropological Perspective', in Surinder S. Jodhka (ed.), *Community and Identities. Contemporary Discourses on Culture and Politics in India* (New Delhi, 2001), p. 34.

²⁹ In Ferdinand Tönnies' seminal analysis (*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Leipzig, 1887), the theory of *Gemeinschaft* is based on the idea that in the original or natural state, there is a complete unity of human wills. *Gemeinschaft*, initially a community by blood develops into a community of place and then of spirit held together by kinship ties, neighbourhood and comradeship. *Gesellschaft*, on the contrary, is a group of people living peacefully alongside one another without being essentially united. Through convention and natural law, *Gesellschaft* forms a single aggregate of natural and artificial individuals. See Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, edited by Jose Harris and Margaret Hollis (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 22–8, 52–63. It is important to note that in the context of colonial Bengal, the inchoate, early civil society from 1800, could not be fitted into the classic *Gesellschaft* mould. While some societies used a principle of open access, there were other extremely powerful associations, such as the Kayastha Sabha, which were based on ascriptive, '*gemeinschaftlich*' loyalties. See Sudipta Kaviraj, 'In Search of Civil Society' in Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (eds), *Civil Society*, pp. 305, 311.

³⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *Bangadarshan* (Ashar, 1901), pp. 82, 100; and 'Bharatbarshiya Samaj', *Bangadarshan* (Sraban, 1901), printed in Satyendranath

dharma was contrasted with the essence of Europe – ‘rights’. The former embodied the law of renunciation while rights implied the law of resistance.³¹ Anandachandra Mitra emphasised that civilisation and social progress in India and Europe had flowed along different lines. While *dharma* guided indigenous society toward salvation, the state-centric European civilisation had utility as its goal.³²

Dharma was also applied to the realm of practice, and related to the uplift of the *jati*. The literati during this time stressed conduct and a specific culture more than birth in their discourse on identity. The notion of cultural Aryan-ness grounded in acceptance of the epics and *puranas*, sharing of Sanskrit as a common mother language (though some non-Aryan languages which had incorporated many Sanskrit words could claim to belong to the Aryan fold), and worship of a supreme Godhead³³ intermeshed with re-orientations of *dharma* as a practice in textbooks for school children, tracts on history and autobiographies of eminent intellectuals. Gopal Chandra Majumdar discussed how the ideals of *dharma* were exemplified in acts and deeds of ancient rulers by referring to legends about Vikramaditya of Ujjain and Pratapjyoti of Matsyadesa.³⁴ As late as 1917, a text called *Banger Ratnamala* or *A Collection of Moral Incidents and Characters in Bengal*, included various anecdotes about the qualities of duty, empathy, self-transcendence, self-dependence, truthfulness, and familial values such as respect to elders and parents. These anecdotes interestingly showed how such ‘approved’ behaviour would be rewarded.³⁵

Interestingly, qualities such as unselfishness and the need to inculcate moral values were also emphasised by Rajnarain Basu in *Se Kal ar E Kal* (1876) in connection with social decline in Bengal,

Ray (ed.), *Rabindranather Chintajagat, Samajchinta*, pp. 303–4. Also see Tagore, ‘Samajbhed’, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Volume 12 (Calcutta, 1957), p. 1092, mentioned by Mriduchhanda Palit, *Itihas Chintay Rabindranath* (Calcutta, 1998), p. 112.

³¹ Bipinchandra Pal, *Soul of India* (Calcutta, 1911), pp. 67–8, quoted in Papiya Chakraborty, *Hindu Response to Nationalist Ferment. Bengal, 1909–1935*, (Calcutta, 1992), p. 116.

³² Anandachandra Mitra, *Prachin Bharat O Adhunik Iyurope Sabhyatar Bhinna Murti* (Mymensingh, 1876), p. 22. Since the eighteenth century, European society was inextricably linked to Enlightenment notions of progress and utility. See Keith Michael Baker, ‘Enlightenment and the Institution of Society: Notes for a Conceptual History’, in Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (eds), *Civil Society*, p. 84.

³³ See Rajnarain Basu, *Bridhha Hindur Asha* (1881, translated to Bengali in 1886), which appeared in *Nabajiban*, and was mentioned by Rajnarain Basu in his autobiography, *Atmcharit* (Calcutta, 1908), p. 96.

³⁴ Gopal Chandra Majumdar, *Niti Darpan* (Calcutta, 1857), pp. 1–3.

³⁵ ‘Porer Janya Chinta’, in Kalikrishna Bhattacharya, *Banger Ratnamala*, Part I (Calcutta, 1917), pp. 48–9.

and were identical to the qualities valorised in the literati's notion of 'proper' conduct forming one of the essential strands of cultural Aryan-ness. Such qualities were expected to promote closeness between unrelated individuals. At the same time, they were necessary for the development of individual personality. *Dharma* was especially relevant to the relationship between the individual and the society. To the literati, it was a mode of life and a code of conduct, which regulated a man's work and activities as a member of society and as an individual to bring about the gradual development of a man, and enable him to reach the goals of human existence.³⁶ The customary good conduct, implicit in observance of *dharma*, included caste duties, those relating to one's clan and family, and to the country.³⁷

The reassertion of traditional values and a code of conduct within the ideological framework of *samaj* stressed the development of the inner strength and potentiality of man who was to be a unit of the reinvigorated Indian nation and eventually of world humanity. He was not to be the component of the sectarian entity of a mere community. Moreover, a man could subscribe to this *dharma* without calling himself a 'Hindu'.³⁸ The flexibility of 'culturally Aryan' afforded scope for the inclusion of those who adhered to *dharma*, but belonged to 'lower orders' or to another community (such as Muslim). The centrality of *dharma* was depicted historically in an Aryan setting, but redefined as a culturally inclusive concept. The contextualisation of *dharma* in past and present contexts, and with reference to Bengal and India, is borne out by a description given in a tract written during the late colonial period about the everyday life and customs of the Bengali people. This tract claimed that the Bengali way of life and certain social practices were rooted in the codes of *dharma* of an ancient Aryan *samaj*. Of crucial significance, this tract claimed, was the encompassing nature of *dharma*, which implied an interconnection of duties toward the family and the society. Even politics and wars could not elude the influence of *dharma*. As *dharma* was an overarching guiding principle, the *samhitas*, especially the *Manusamhita*, were called *Dharmashastras*.³⁹

³⁶ See P. V. Kane, 'History of the Dharmashastras' quoted in V.S. Sukanthar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* (1957), p. 80. This has been mentioned in D. R. Jatava, *Indian Society* (Jaipur, 1998), pp. 52–3.

³⁷ See J. N. Sinha, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Volume I (Calcutta, 1956), p. 173.

³⁸ Papia Chakraborty, *Hindu Response to Nationalist Ferment*, pp. 115, 375.

³⁹ *Samhitas* were Vedic hymns written in verse. See Prohash Chandra Sen, *Prachin Bangasahitya Hoite Bangalir Dainandin Jibon O Samajik Achar Byabaharer Parichay* (Calcutta, 1920), p. 14.

Therefore, through a reinterpretation of its ideological focus, *samaj* was made into an outward-looking, overarching unit that could incorporate a melange of groups, and symbolise nationhood and Indian-ness. Voluntary organisations such as the Dharmarakhini Samaj (1871), popularised by the poetry of Sri Sriram Palit, were emblematic of the literati's perception that *dharma* had an all-pervasive impact on *samaj*.⁴⁰ Redefined according to these criteria, *dharma* could create a *samajik* basis for unity, not by suppressing, but by accommodating the dissimilar. Indian history was seen as a meeting-ground where discord was mediated and settled by *dharmik* consensus. Even when there was a clash of races and civilisations, the ideal of unity triumphed in the end. Thus the supposed violence and disruptive impact of the Aryan/non-Aryan clash was neutralised by assimilation, bonding the two races by cultural bridges, mythology and epics. Rabindranath Tagore believed that the victory of Ramchandra over non-Aryans was the outcome of a *dharmik* battle; he did not force the submission of the defeated, but won them over, receiving their devotion.⁴¹

Through such reinterpretations of *dharma*, the literati shaped the idea of unity (*aikya*), which (1) had been present in Indian history down the ages, but somewhere along the way, had been lost sight of, and (2) was indispensable in the present context of subjugation, and given the inner differences among Bengalis in particular, and Indians in general. The connection between *samaj* and unity lay in the creation of oneness, through a welding of diverse fragments into a complex whole. This idea of unity was posited in past and present contexts, and also envisioned in relation to two referential contexts – Bengal and India. Such interpretations redefined indigenous civilisation (*sabhyata*) as a blend of *dharma*, moral principles and intellect. Civilisation was further explained with reference to its familial connotation, which again was contextualised in terms of other sets of duties toward the *samaj*.⁴²

⁴⁰ Sri Sriram Palit's poem in *Som Prakash*, Number 27 (9 Joishtha, 1871), printed in Benoy Ghosh (ed.), *Shamoyikpatre Banglar Samajchitra*, Volume IV (Calcutta, 1966), pp. 229–32.

⁴¹ See Rabindranath Tagore, 'Bharatbarshiya Samaj', *Bangadarshan* (Sraban, 1901), printed in Satyendranath Ray (ed.), *Rabindranather Chintajagat*, pp. 303–4.

⁴² Srikrishna Das, *Sabhyatar Itihas* (Calcutta, 1876), p. 3.

Prioritisation of *Samaj*

Samaj became a priority to the Bengali literati in the late nineteenth century because the redefinition of the Bengali historical view aimed at providing an imaginative unity to the past. As history and the recreation of a *jati*⁴³ were closely related, the past was to be re-imagined as a background for re-forging unity. The lack of empirical and documentary evidence ruptured dynastic chronicles. It was difficult to reconstruct a political history of Bengal. *Samaj* was therefore prioritised over polity⁴⁴ and seen as providing continuity with the Bengali past, essential for bringing the collective self into existence. However, polity and society were not entirely segregated arenas. Even while highlighting the need of a history rooted in *samaj*, Akshoykumar Moitreya drew attention to the dual role of Hindu zamindars during the reign of the Muslim nawabs in Bengal. During the reign of Sirajuddaula, Bengal was divided into 1660 *parganas* (administrative units). These *parganas* were placed under zamindars. They were chieftains of their respective realms (and had political duties) and were also *samajik* chiefs, mediating and arbitrating local dispute and social conflict.⁴⁵ This local history emphasises the independence of many Hindu zamindars. Even after the fall of Kedar Ray,⁴⁶ zamindars such as the Bharadvaj Chaudhuris and Raghunandan were known for their sense of justice, and social and political power. Raghunandan sought to increase his social power by inviting many socially high Baidyas to his zamindari.⁴⁷ Such descriptions seem to fit the analytic grid of Nicholas Dirks, in which

⁴³ *Jati* is used here in the sense of a collective self.

⁴⁴ Sumit Sarkar has drawn attention to the prioritisation of society over polity in the literati's appeal to culture that identified *samaj* as synonymous with religious community rather than territorial nationhood. See Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, pp. 21–2. The intent of this study is to go beyond such analytic horizons by suggesting that society and polity were not always rigidly segregated, and that the preoccupation with *samaj* was evident well before the Swadeshi era. Moreover, ideas about *samaj* developed within contextual parameters closely related to notions of the Bengali self vis-à-vis others. These wider projections of *samaj* are lacking in Sarkar's analysis.

⁴⁵ Akshoykumar Moitreya, 'Sekaler Sukhdukha', *Sirajuddaula* (Calcutta, 1897), pp. 4–5.

⁴⁶ Kedar Ray was one of the twelve chieftains of medieval Bengal known for their valour.

⁴⁷ Baidya was a well known sub-caste of Bengal. For details about Raghunandan see Anandanath Ray, 'Bir Kahini, Faridpurer Itihaser Ekangsha', *Aitihāsik Chitra*, Second Year, Number 9 (Boishakh-Jyoishtha, 1905), pp. 244–8.

state forms, while not fully assimilable to western categories of the state, were powerful components in Indian civilisation. Indian society and caste were shaped by political struggles and processes.⁴⁸ Rethought within this conceptual framework, the history of *samaj* found expression in the works of eminent intellectuals such as Rabindranath Tagore and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, as well as in tracts authored by famous historians such as Nagendranath Basu.

Kaliprasanna Das's comment in *Barnasram Dharma O Hindu Jiban* expressed the rationale behind the preoccupation with *samajik itihas*. 'The expression of Hindu collective life is not the state but the *samaj*. The key to its unity is not law, but *dharma* [religion and righteous way of living]; and the norms, customs, manners and practices approved by the chiefs of the *samaj* are an integral part of that *dharma*.'⁴⁹ The preoccupation with *samaj* and not polity was also a means to counter and erase the fact of subjugation by foreigners who had invaded India. It was asserted that as battles had been fought between kings, they were not people's wars, and so the people who were the integral elements of *samaj*, had never been defeated. As Akshoykumar Moitreya explained, dynastic change did not mean a corresponding change in people's social norms, and lifestyle. The fundamental nature of the commonalty remained unaltered.⁵⁰ Political history, it was concluded, was not the means by which the secrets of the Indian past could be revealed. Writing in 1904, Rabindranath Tagore recommended the use of history and historical memory in a way that would lead to the realisation that 'The independence of *samaj* is greater than all other forms of independence.'⁵¹ The literati's identification of *samaj* as an unchanging essence of Indian life, unhampered by political turmoil, shows an interesting use of colonial denigrations⁵² and Orientalist constructions of an unchanging, essentialised India⁵³ lost in Hegelian a-historicism.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown. Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Ann Arbor, 1993), pp. 4–5.

⁴⁹ Kaliprasanna Das, *Barnasram Dharma O Hindu Jiban* (Calcutta, 1935), p. 127.

⁵⁰ Akshoykumar Moitreya, *Gourer Katha* (reprinted Calcutta, 1984), p. 31.

⁵¹ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Swadeshi Samaj', *Bangadarshan* (Ashvin, 1904), printed in Satyendranath Ray (ed.), *Rabindranather Chintajagat*, p. 19.

⁵² Colonial writers such as W.W. Hunter believed that lack of unity among Bengalis had prevented them from becoming a nation in the political sense. See Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal* (London, 1897), p. 86.

⁵³ Ronald B. Inden has shown that European ethnographers, and Orientalist scholars conjured an imagined India where institutions such as caste were construed as unchanging essences, designed to subjugate and demean a politically impotent, and dreaming Indian other. See Inden, *Imagining India* (Chicago, 1990), p. 67.

⁵⁴ The Hegelian notion of history embodies the notion of progress as history moves towards a final goal. To Hegel, the history of the Oriental world, including Mongolian,

Sources of *Samajik* (Social) History and Dissemination of the Literati's Ideas through Periodicals and Family Histories

Unlike political history, which, as mentioned above, was difficult to reconstruct due to the absence of reliable sources, the history of *samaj* was a more viable project because of the vast array of indigenous sources relating to *samajik* history. These included *kulagranthas* (books on lineage and descent), ancestral accounts, and local genealogies. To Nagendranath Basu, these were invaluable for writing familial, caste and sub-caste histories. Each *samaj* had ancestral texts offering valuable insights into that group's origin, spread and status. Such texts were regarded as sources of national/racial pride.⁵⁵ The use of these sources was highlighted by later authors too. Benoy Ghosh, for instance, drew attention to the importance of *kulagranthas* in reconstructing social history. Panchanan's *Kulakarika* captured details of *samajik* decline in seventeenth-century Bengal occasioned by the invasions of the Portuguese and the Mogs. Benoy Ghosh argued that the economic decline of the Brahmanical *samaj* in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century need to be related to such antecedents of social ills. These facts were corroborated by missionary accounts in journals and reports.⁵⁶ Combined with studies of social norms and customs, which varied from one region to another, sources of *samajik* history could overcome the shortcomings of documents relating to political history. A sociological orientation, focusing on local materials, was regarded as a new technique that would bridge the gap between events and mentalities, and connect seemingly discrete social events and instances of local culture.⁵⁷

Evaluation of sources was accompanied by references, for example, by Nagendranath Basu, to *samajik* history over eras. According to him, descriptions of the indigenous *samaj* were given even in ancient texts like *Rigsamhita*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. At a more general level, therefore, the sources used for reconstructing *samajik* history included not only local genealogies, but also ancient texts and epics,

Chinese or Indian represents the first stage of the development of the principle of consciousness of freedom, when the spirit is immersed in nature in a state of unfree particularity. See M. J. Inwood (ed.), *Hegel: Selections* (New York, London, 1989), pp. 351–2.

⁵⁵ Nagendranath Basu, *Banger Jatiya Itihas* (Calcutta, 1900), p. 3.

⁵⁶ See Benoy Ghosh, *Vidyasagar O Bangali Samaj* (Calcutta, 1957), pp. 93–102.

⁵⁷ Writing at a much later period, Benoy Ghosh remarked on this, explaining how the project of *samajik itihas* gathered momentum. See Benoy Ghosh, *Pashchimbanger Sanskriti* (Calcutta, 1978), pp. 32–3.

and historical chronicles. Satishchandra Raychaudhuri composed *Bangiya Samaj* in 1899 by relying on sources such as the *Manusamhita*, *Mahabharata*, Kalhan's *Rajtarangini*, as well as genealogies of local royal families such as Raja Paramananda's *Ghatakgrantha*, and even Muslim works, such as Ghulam Hussain's *Seir Mutaqerin*.⁵⁸

Reference to texts was accompanied by fieldwork. While writing the history of the Kayastha Samaj, Nagendranath Basu went to Dinajpur and Bhagalpur, and also to the main Kayastha centres including Kandi, Jemo, Rashra, Par Rashra, Chhatina, and Joyjan. Ancient family accounts were obtained from Premlal Ghatak of Shibrambati. The Maharaj Bahadur of Dinajpur sent ancient manuscripts.⁵⁹ An urge for a social history of Bengal from the mid-nineteenth century made such sources valuable, and later historians developed the legacy. Benoy Ghosh mentioned that he obtained invaluable material from Pandit Dineshchandra Bhattacharya for reconstructing the *samajik* history of eighteenth-century Bengal and even earlier.⁶⁰

Closely related to the participation and help given by local aristocrats to the literati engrossed in *samajik* history, was the issue of dissemination of notions of this kind of history and queries as to whether they were limited to the elite sections of the society. Most periodicals such as the *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, *Arya Darshan*, *Nabya Bharat*, and *Madhyastha* that helped disseminate the literati's notions of *samajik* history had an elite and urban clientele. Regarded as a 'high-class journal', the *Tattvabodhini* enjoyed a popularity among educated, mainly high-caste Bengalis with a monthly circulation of eight hundred copies.⁶¹ Issues of rural uplift and improvement of the condition of the 'lower orders' in Bengal, though addressed, remained marginal to the concerns of the *Tattvabodhini*. Similarly, the periodical *Som Prakash* circulated mainly among the elite and urban sections. It is difficult to determine whether rural subscribers increased in number even after its editor Dwarkanath Vidyabhushan shifted the press to his native village.⁶² Collaboration between the aristocrats and the professional middle class, and the popularisation of their ideas in Brahma journals reveal how mentalities conjoined in an 'elite' view of *samaj*. What

⁵⁸ Satishchandra Raychaudhuri, *Bangiya Samaj* (Barahanagar, 1899), pp. 6–7.

⁵⁹ Nagendranath Basu, *Uttarrarhiya Kayastha Kanda* (Calcutta, 1910), Introduction.

⁶⁰ Benoy Ghosh, *Vidyasagar O Bangali Samaj*, p. 97.

⁶¹ See James Long, *Returns from the Records of the Bengal Government* (Calcutta, 1859), p. xiii.

⁶² See Shibnath Shastri, *Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Bangasamaj* (Calcutta, 1904), pp. 286–7.

was lacking was an active participation of the 'lower orders' in the literati's project of *samajik itihās* through a meaningful grafting of histories of their *samajs* and that of the high-caste, professional, western-educated literati. The elite orientation was evident also in meetings and conventions held as late as the first and second decades of the twentieth century. In 1912, an All-India Kayastha Sammelan was held in the Calcutta Town Hall under Maharaj Girijanath Ray Bahadur.⁶³

The Formation and Types of *Samajs*

Nationhood, redefined through a history of culture and attachment based on the idea of a harmonious social order, was crucially connected to the formation of *samaj* over historical eras. The roots of social formation were seen as embedded in interrelations between *samaj* and other social collectivities such as *jati* and *sampraday*. Even while distinguishing *jati* and *sampraday*,⁶⁴ and specifically pointing out the ways in which they emerged and developed in Bengal, the literati considered *samaj* to be an accommodative conceptual rubric that could unite castes, *jatis* and *sampradays*. An article in *Nabha Bharat* written in the late nineteenth century construed the relationship between *samaj* and *sampraday* as that between the whole and the parts, and underlined the distinction between *jati*, *sampraday* and caste by arguing that the caste connotations of Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra were later encrustations on a *sampradayik* core. The early Aryan *samaj* consisted of three *sampradays* – Purohit, Kshatriya and Vaishya formed according to occupational criteria. The Purohitis were not the Brahman *jati*; they later developed into the Brahman *sampraday*. The Hindu *samaj* grew on the basis of these three *sampradays* and that of the Shudra, which emerged later. Brahmans were the leaders of this vast *samaj-rajya*, the Kshatriyas were its preservers, and the Vaishyas

⁶³ This speech of Maharaj Bahadur of Dinajpur was printed in *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 18 Magh, 1912.

⁶⁴ According to Digindranarayan Bhattacharya, *jati* approximated caste, while *sampraday* referred to groups divided according to economic, cultural, educational and occupational criteria. *Sampraday* could also mean religious community and sect. See Digindranarayan Bhattacharya, *Jati Bhed* (Calcutta, 1918), p. 4.

and Shudras were its component parts.⁶⁵ This account has resonance with Kaliprasanna Das's view that *jatis*, castes and *sampradays* fitted into the overarching framework of *samaj*.⁶⁶ Analyses of caste histories therefore became relevant in moves to re-configure unity.

Caste *Samajs*

The intersection and overlap between the conceptual sites of caste and *samaj* had interesting reflections in the literati's descriptions of the rise of specific caste *samajs* in Bengal. These were reconstructed on the basis of sources of *samajik* history including local genealogies. The notion of caste as *samaj* was a salient feature of such descriptions, which often contained mythic elements. The deployment of myth intersecting with historical and sociological narrative filled the void of a disrupted past and provided continuity to accounts of caste and sub-caste *samajs*. Local myths often shared familiar ground with 'main' legends explaining the rise of the Bengali society and the ramifications of the caste system in Bengal as a whole. Nagendranath Basu's deployment of the legend of Adityasur in his account of the Uttarrarhiya Kayastha Samaj closely resembled that of Adisur: 'In 882, Adityasur, the king of Rarh, invited five Kayasthas to come to Rarhdesha who promulgated new social rules and regulations.'⁶⁷ Other accounts of the Kayastha Samaj also revealed mythic strands. Kalinath Chaudhuri wrote that Parasu Rama killed the last Kshatriya, Chandrasen and had one son called Kayastha, who adopted Chitrugupta's *dharma*, and inculcated codes of conduct among Kayasthas.⁶⁸ *Samajs* of other castes and sub-castes were also supposed to have *puranic* origins. Kalinath Chaudhuri's graphic description of the emergence of the Baidya Samaj reflected lineages from the *Skandapurana*.⁶⁹ His account traced the origin of specific caste and sub-caste *samajs* in Bengal to intermixture between the more well known castes of the fourfold caste system on the one hand, and intermediate

⁶⁵ Debendranath Mukhopadhyay, 'Hindu Samajer Prachin O Adhunik Abastha' *Nabya Bharat*, Volume 4, Number 3 (Ashar, 1886), pp. 118–9. The expression *samaj-rajya* is indicative of the polity/society interconnection.

⁶⁶ Kaliprasanna Das, *Barnasram Dharma O Hindu Jiban*, p. 117.

⁶⁷ Adisur was the legendary Sena king who invited five Brahmans to come to Bengal from Kanauj. For details about the Adityasur legend, similar to the Adisur myth, see Nagendranath Basu, *Uttarrarhiya Kayastha Kanda*, pp. 12–13.

⁶⁸ Kalinath Chaudhuri, *Rajshahir Sankhipta Itihas* (Calcutta, 1901), pp. 30–6.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

castes on the other. At the same time it sought to demonstrate that the notion of caste as *samajs* had been present in Bengal for several centuries.

How did caste *samajs* act as a site for forging unities? *Samajik* unity was supposed to have been personified in chiefs of *samajs* (for instance, Udaynarayan Mitra⁷⁰) who had been granted titles. Connections between caste *samajs* and the Muslim court of Bengal, as well as links with earlier (ancient and medieval) *samajs* of consequence, and with other caste *samajs* widened the basis of unity. Nagendranath Basu explained how these elements intersected in the rise of the Dakshinrarhiya Kayastha Samaj under Purandar Khan. His father Ishan Khan held a high post in the Muslim court of Bengal, and Purandar had connections with the Bangaja Kayastha Samaj. During the 1480s he was connected with the Brahman Samaj as well, and despite being a Kayastha, was involved in its improvement.⁷¹

Fusions between Brahman and Kayastha families were also highlighted through the evidence of scripts discovered in Bengal and elsewhere, especially fourth and fifth-century texts from the Deccan, and *Bangshabrahman* (a text relating to the ancient Bengali *samaj*).⁷² These showed that Brahmans had titles like Basu, Sen and Gupta. The literati reasoned that as these titles were not in use in the present Brahman Samaj, but were found among Kayasthas and Baidyas, many ancient Brahman families must have merged with the *samaj* of Kayasthas and others. Moreover, familial histories constructed from genealogical lists were often contextualised with reference to the wider stream of Bengal's social history. For instance, Kalinath Chaudhuri traced the rise of the Lahiri family and their connection with a wider Bengali *samaj*.⁷³

Emphasis on *samajik* unities forged through connections between pre-modern caste *samajs* can be related to late nineteenth-century changes in the social scenario in Bengal. The relative fluidity of the caste system in Bengal (instead of the fourfold division, Bengalis were divided into Brahman and Shudra, and all forty-one *jatis* of Bengal

⁷⁰ Udaynarayan Mitra became the chief of Bengal Kayasthas. See Shashibhushan Bidyalankar, *Jiboni Kosh, Bharatiya Aitihāsik*, Volume 1 (Calcutta, 1936), p. 366.

⁷¹ Nagendranath Basu, 'Purandar Khan O Dakshinrarhiya Kayastha Samaj', *Dakshinrarhiya Kayastha Samaj* (Calcutta, 1933), pp. 99–102.

⁷² Dineshchandra Sarkar, *Sanskritik Itihaser Prasanga* (Calcutta, 1982), p. 11.

⁷³ See Kalinath Chaudhuri, *Rajshahir Sankhipta Itihas*, pp. 242–8.

fitted into this classification)⁷⁴ interacted with the waning of birth as the sole marker of social status. The latter now came to be governed by criteria of wealth and education. The projection of present identities into the past revealed a living link between late colonial realities and sociological lineages of a much earlier era. The link between the past and the present was also clear in the literati's emphasis on continuities embedded in *samajik* transitions. Some *samajik* unions embracing people of different castes had existed for centuries, and acquired new dimensions during the second half of the nineteenth century. One of these was the *ekjai*, the organisation of a sub-caste, which represented *samaj*/society for all practical purposes.⁷⁵ In 1480 Purandar Khan formed an *ekjai*.⁷⁶ The *ekjai* as a social forum continued through the centuries. During the colonial period Raja Nabakrishna Deb of Shobhabazar convened *ekjais*. In 1854, the *Ekjai Patrika* was started by the Debs. Their initiative demonstrates how region-specific *samajik* chiefs joined in a caste-based *ekjai* to create a forum for unity. The Debs were helped by Rajnarain Basu of the Mahinagar Samaj, Brajakishor Ghosh of Bali Samaj and Joykrishna Basu of the Baganda Samaj.⁷⁷ *Samajik* imaginings rooted to such traditions of unity and their re-orientations unfolded within a mentality connecting the thought processes of the 'orthodox' Hindu Bengalis (the Debs of Shobhabazar) and the reformist Brahmos (represented by men like Rajnarain Basu).

Sub-regional *Samajs* and Roots of Unity: From Region to Nation

We have seen how connections between caste *samajs* and the mediating role of titled chiefs reconfigured unity. Such linkages, asserted the literati, were also forged by sub-regional *samajs* of Bengal, which had

⁷⁴ Niharranjan Ray, *Bangalir Itihas, Adi Parba* (Calcutta, 1952), pp. 257–323. The Bengali Brahmans though enjoying a high ritual status, never held that exclusive high social and economic position that the Brahmans of South India had enjoyed in the past. They had to share economic and social power with other castes. See André Beteille, *Caste, Class and Power, Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village* (Berkeley, 1965), pp. 3–10, 191–2.

⁷⁵ The leader of the sub-caste was known as the *goshthipati*. For details about the formation of *ekjais* in the late eighteenth century, see Pradip Sinha, 'Calcutta and the Currents of History, 1690–1912', in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta, The Living City*, Volume I (Delhi, 1990), p. 38.

⁷⁶ Kalinath Chaudhuri, *Rajshahir Sankhipta Itihas*, p. 104.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 147–64.

existed since the medieval era. To the literati, the significance of sub-regional *samajs* was threefold: (1) they acted as a platform for uniting people of different castes, but belonging to the same village and/or administrative unit such as *pradesh*, *pargana* or *subah*; (2) they had preserved unity in the face of foreign invasions; and (3) they were emblematic of a pan-Bengali unity.

The literati highlighted the rise of the Bikrampur Samaj of Ballal Sen which included different castes such as Brahmans, Kayasthas, Baidyas, Nabashakhs and Baniks. Similarly the Jessore Samaj (sixteenth century) established by Raja Basanta Roy, ancestor of the Bengali hero Pratapaditya, during the latter's lifetime, attracted different types of Bangaja and Dakshinrarhiya Kayasthas, Baidyas and Baniks. They were employed by Pratapaditya. Moreover, such sub-regional *samajs* proliferated into different branches. The Jessore Samaj got divided into the Sripur and Taki branches. Bhabanidas Raychaudhuri of Sripur gave monetary donations to many Brahmans, Kayasthas and Baidyas.⁷⁸ Different branches of the same sub-regional *samaj* were connected through the leadership of certain individuals who controlled the working of the branch as well as the centre. Krishnadas of the Taki branch of the Jessore Samaj was one such leader.⁷⁹ The instance of the Jessore Samaj showed that what originally started as a *samaj* of Kulin⁸⁰ Kayasthas, later came to embrace many castes and social groups and provided the basis for a wider unity.

Among sub-regional medieval *samajs*, the Baklanagar Samaj formed in 1320 by Danujamardan Deb, a Bangaja Kayastha of the De family was considered especially emblematic of unity. Satishchandra Raychaudhuri gave a graphic description of the rise and significance of this samaj:

The Muslim invasions of Bengal led to social turmoil and decline . . . Following the ideals of the Brahman and Kayastha *samajs*, different *jatis* residing in other parts of Bengal formed their own *samajs* . . . leading to division and fragmentation. But this upheaval did not create divisions within the Bangaja Kayastha Samaj. When Bikrampur fell to the Muslims, Danujamardan Deb established a kingdom in the Brahmaputra delta in 1320 and called it

⁷⁸ See Satishchandra Raychaudhuri, *Bangiya Samaj*, pp. 169–70.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁸⁰ The word 'Kulin' was taken from *kula* meaning family, and Kulin denoted a man of pure lineage. Kulins were orders of nobility introduced by Ballal Sen. The object of Kulinism was to maintain the purity of different families by dividing them into endogamous groups. For details on Kulinism see T. Raychaudhuri and B. Raychaudhuri, *The Brahmans of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1981), pp. 26–7.

Chandradvip Rajya. He established a *samaj* in his previous capital Baklanagar. The Bangaja Kayastha Kulins . . . became members of this *samaj*, and invested the power of social control in Danujamardan's hands . . . The internal organisation of the Baklanagar Samaj was facilitated by the appointment of a Brahman genealogist who maintained familial purity . . . a ranking of the Kayasthas, and composition of books on family. This *samaj* later became the centre of Bengali *samaj*.⁸¹

Satishchandra Raychaudhuri's description of the Baklanagar Samaj as a microcosm of the Bengali *samaj* reveals the inner link between a local *samaj* and the idea of a pan-regional *samaj*. These connections were mentally forged by certain social actualities. As the instances of Bakla and Jessore reveal, a sub-regional *samaj*, originally the preserve of a specific caste/sub-caste, could later embrace diverse castes and social groups, and provide a basis for a pan-regional unity. The Baklanagar Samaj, for instance, though originally a *samaj* of Bangaja Kayasthas, later inducted Brahman elements. Social inductions such as these helped forge an imaginative interconnection between a local *samaj* and a pan-regional identity. This in turn explained why Satishchandra Raychaudhuri named his book *Bangiya Samaj*, though it was primarily about the rise of the Jessore Samaj, and dedicated it to four *samajik* chiefs of Bengal, Ramkanta, Gopinath, Kalinath and Baikunthanath.⁸² In a similar vein, Nagendranath Basu's deployment of the local legend of Adityasur (similar to the main legend of Adisur) in connection with the Uttarrarhiya Kayastha Samaj revealed a linkage between the whole and the part. Nagendranath, though distinguishing the Uttarrarhiya Kayastha Samaj from a pan-Bengali *samaj*, at a deeper level reworked local unity within a wider contextual grid of Bengali *samajik* origins and interconnections. Differences between particular sub-regional and caste *samajs* did not preclude an undercurrent of belonging to a larger entity. In a powerfully imagined regional *samaj*, distinctive essences were not diluted. On the contrary, through specific regional variations, the many dimensions of the larger Bengali *samaj* acquired varied refinements. In some cases, the norms and practices of a sub-regional *samaj* spread all over Bengal. Satishchandra Raychaudhuri was convinced that the ideals of Pratapaditya's Jessore *samaj* spread to other parts of Bengal.⁸³

Satishchandra's conceptualisation was emblematic of attempts to unite diverse elements of Bengal within specific pan-regional

⁸¹ See Satishchandra Raychaudhuri, *Bangiya Samaj*, pp. 75–8.

⁸² *Ibid.*, Preface.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

parameters, which were also underlined in sub-regional histories claiming to symbolise a people's past. Jogendranath Gupta's *Bikrampur Itihas* envisioned the ideal of Bengali unity through a specific regional prism. To Jogendranath, Bikrampur symbolised the glory of entire Bengal. The history of Bikrampur was not merely the history of a single *pargana*. It contained elements of a pan-regional history applicable to Bengal as a whole.⁸⁴

The logic of transition from region to nation, though internally contested,⁸⁵ unfolded through intersections between caste and sub-regional *samajs* on the one hand, and the notion of a pan-regional Bengali *samaj* on the other. The idea of a Bengali *samaj* was then connected to that of an Indian (Bharatbarshiya) *samaj* through emphases on the incorporative nature of *samaj* rooted in *dharma* and *atmiyata*, and cultural Aryanism, which created a space for inclusions. This explained why and how a regional *samaj* could extend its limits to include 'others' such as the neighbouring ethnicities (Oriyas and Assamese) as well as other Indians adhering to the norms of cultural Aryanism. The demarcating line between the regional and a pan-Indian *samaj* was often blurred. Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore referred to the unique features of a pan-Indian *samaj*, rather than narrowly focusing on the Bengali *samaj*. Bhudeb's 'Hindu *samaj*'⁸⁶ and Rabindranath's '*swadeshi samaj*'⁸⁷ ideologically connected the region to the nation.

The Literati's Imagination of *Samaj*: Influencing Parameters and Limitations

The literati's imaginings of nationhood underpinned by the ideology of *samaj* had inherent limitations. These limitations can best be understood by exploring the specific social parameters that underlay the literati's thought-processes. Their opinions actually formed a complex mosaic reflecting variations of familial background,

⁸⁴ Jogendranath Gupta, *Bikrampur Itihas*, (Calcutta, 1909), Introduction.

⁸⁵ The idea of a pan-Bengali, and indeed, a pan-Indian *samajik* unity was contested because it developed within the interstices of segmentary identities. Unity co-existed alongside, and in contention with bonds of caste, micro-region and class.

⁸⁶ Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, 'Samajik Prakriti; Hindu Ebong Oporapor Samaj', in Pramathanath Bisi (ed.), *Bhudeb Rachana Sambhar* (Calcutta, 1957), pp. 33–9.

⁸⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, *Swadeshi Samaj* (1904), printed in *Sankalan* (Calcutta, 1969), pp. 55–67.

upbringing and individual and group experiences. However, certain areas of consensus can be traced. The literati as a social group were influenced by the nature of transition that their own *samaj* was undergoing. The colonial predicament unleashed changes that led to a rethinking of identities within the indigenous social hierarchy. Significant social parameters influencing the literati were changing criteria and indices of class, status, and titles reflecting social, and not political history.

Criteria governing inclusions/exclusions of groups into the literati's *samaj* stemmed from the social importance attached to class. Class here is not seen through the Marxian prism of economic divisions,⁸⁸ but used to mean rank or status in society, and evaluated according to certain criteria including (1) education, especially western education, as well as erudition in indigenous traditional knowledge; (2) professional qualifications and employment under the raj; and (3) acquisition of wealth.⁸⁹ Class, rooted in the above criteria, especially education, became more important than caste divisions based on familial pride. In late nineteenth-century Bengal property/wealth could be acquired by taking up professions. These became more relevant than traditional caste status, although familial heritage and high birth were still significant social markers. S.N. Mukherjee has shown that the word '*abhijat*' originally meaning high-born, or of aristocratic lineage, now even referred to 'new zamindars', traders, people of low castes who had amassed wealth, weavers (the Basaks of Calcutta) and the Baniks (goldsmiths). The latter belonged to the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy but were considered *abhijat*, and known by the generic term *bhadralok*.⁹⁰

The juxtaposition of these criteria was evident in the acquisition of titles also. Earlier, as a continuing legacy of a tradition that stretched back to the medieval period, titles were granted to high-caste

⁸⁸ Marxism holds that until the consolidation of socialism, societies are divided into antagonistic classes. In this scheme one's class is determined by one's relationship to the means of production. See Robert Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 227.

⁸⁹ The importance of wealth as an index of social status was emphasised by Ramdulal Dey, a self made man and a millionaire. He emphasised that money had the power of restoring caste. See Shib Chunder Bose, *The Hindoos As They Are. A Description of the Manners, Customs and Inner Life of Hindoo Society in Bengal* (Calcutta, London, 1883), p. 179.

⁹⁰ S.N. Mukherjee, 'The Bhadrals of Bengal', in Dipankar Gupta (ed.), *Social Stratification* (Delhi, 1991), p. 181. He clarified that high social status depended on both caste and class, and the literati were a group having upper caste and/ or upper class status.

individuals who had distinguished themselves in their local *samajs*. These titles were conferred through local consensus and the intervention of *samajik* chiefs, as also by the ruling Muslim nawab. From the second half of the nineteenth century a more complex constellation governed status rules and social primacy. Girish Lahiri of Kasimpur, Rajshahi, acquired the title of 'Ray Bahadur' from the British not merely because he was a scion of a local aristocracy, but also because he and his family members were educated, professionally qualified and associated with the colonial authority. Moreover, he was modest, courageous, determined and selfless. These qualities won for him recognition from the Barendra Brahman Samaj.⁹¹ Conduct played a major role in determining a person's social status. The relevance of conduct can be related to the earlier emphasis on caste and social supremacy deriving from high birth.

The literati's ideas were influenced by high-caste affiliation as well as the changing indices of social status mentioned above. The emphasis on education and professional qualifications as well as on a code of conduct ingrained in cultural Aryan-ness helped recast the literati's self image as an aristocracy of culture. The literati, more specifically, the middle class was convinced of its superiority as a conscious social and intellectual group. Such perceptions had reflections in their ideas about nationhood underpinned by the notion of *samaj*. Their writings inevitably betrayed the particular bias of a professional 'middle class'. Since there was no simultaneous rise of a similar group among neighbouring ethnicities such as the Oriyas or Assamese, the *samajs* of the latter were often regarded as inferior to the Bengali *samaj*. Even in ideas about internal others such as the 'lower orders' within Bengal, high-caste affiliations and changing social status patterns played a vital role, and explained limitations. As late as 1902, Rabindranath Tagore stressed the Brahmanical basis of *samaj*. His views expressed in a letter to Brajendrakishor Deb Barman, the son of the king of Tripura, revealed his convictions about the primacy of the Brahmans and Kshatriyas in the indigenous *samaj*.⁹² Tagore's concern about the Brahmanical basis of *samaj* was related to his convictions about the duty of Brahmans to control and regulate society.⁹³

⁹¹ Kalinath Chaudhuri, *Rashahir Sankhipta Itihas*, pp. 242–8.

⁹² Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Brajakishor Deb, written on 7 Boishakh, 1902, printed in Satyendranath Ray (ed.), *Rabindranather Chintajagat*, p. 88.

⁹³ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Brahman', *Bangadarshan* (Ashar, 1902), printed in Satyendranath Ray (ed.), *Rabindranather Chintajagat*, pp. 89–91.

These perceptions conditioned re-imaginings of *samaj* underpinned by the superiority and social roles of the higher castes. The remodelling of *samaj* according to these parameters involved a unity among the higher castes. Tagore regarded the Brahmans as the head of the *samajik* body, and in order to keep it high, the neck and shoulders also needed to be elevated. He argued, therefore, that the *samaj* should accept the Baidyas, Kayasthas and Baniks as *dvija* (twice born, usually meaning Brahman).⁹⁴ Thus the Brahmanical limitation of *samaj* was partially overcome by a re-definition of Brahmanhood itself. It was not a matter of birth, but character. It was implicitly related to the ideas of *dharma*, and the observance of a righteous life, by following specific social codes and practices. The crucial point, as Tagore explained, was that the Baidyas, Kayasthas and Baniks were not different from Brahmans in terms of their behaviour, intellect and ability. In other words, the qualities of cultural Aryan-ness were present in them. They were, however, very different from the true non-Aryans (the forest and hill tribes) who presumably did not follow the rules and regulations of *dharma*, and the cultural traits that comprised the essence of Aryan-ness.⁹⁵ Defined within such parameters, upper caste/upper class bias though qualified in terms of cultural Aryan-ness had reflections in conceptualisations of *samaj*. An article in the periodical *Som Prakash* in 1866 explicitly underlined the role of the social elite within and beyond Bengal in convening meetings to promote unity.⁹⁶ However, there were complex strands in such attitudes. Responses and perceptions did not remain static over time, and were situationally altered. Tagore, for instance, later changed his patriarchal and Brahmanical stance.⁹⁷ Other writers such as Dineshchandra Sen highlighted non-Brahmanical 'folk' elements of Bengali culture.⁹⁸

The limitations of high-caste affiliation and emphases on cultural Aryanism and the Brahmanical basis of *samaj* can be related to a more general overall limitation. The literati's ideas about nationhood were undeniably framed within the cultural-nationalist parameters

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 92–3.

⁹⁶ 'Hindu Samaj', in *Som Prakash* (5 Agraphayan, 1866), printed in Benoy Ghosh (ed.), *Shamoyikpatre Banglar Samajchitra*, Volume IV (Calcutta, 1966), p. 211.

⁹⁷ Changes in the attitude of an individual over specific periods have been mentioned by Sumit Sarkar. See Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, p. 27.

⁹⁸ See Dineshchandra Sen, *Mymensingh Geetika* (Calcutta, 1923) and *Purbabanga Geetika* (Calcutta, 1932).

of Hindu identity.⁹⁹ However, there was a tension in the rhetoric, and complex strands in an otherwise 'Hindu discourse'. For instance, the literati's conception of a social utopia based on their ideas about *samaj* and nationhood did not necessarily exclude non-Hindus such as Muslims in all contexts. The realms of utopia and reality converged in occasional and situational inclusions of such communal others into the re-imagined *samaj*. Satishchandra Raychaudhuri pointed out that during the rise of Taki's Chaudhuri family in Basirhat, some high born Muslims acquired social status and were accorded respect.¹⁰⁰ This can be related to the fact that, within a predominantly Hindu discourse, some voices stressed plurality. Akshoykumar Moitreya idealised an Indo-Islamic past.¹⁰¹ What was lacking, however, was a realistic integration of the histories of internal others such as the 'lower orders' by tracing their own voice, or of communal others through social intermingling, or any significant and uniform valorisation of a joint Indo-Islamic heritage.

Towards a Better *Samaj*: Decline and Progress

Despite the limitations discussed above, *samaj* was situated within a historical context, with an aim to effect improvement and progress. To the literati *samaj* had an inherent life of its own, and this lay at the heart of its ability to harmonise difference. This inner dynamism also implied that it was possible to improve *samaj* and chart a future of betterment, crucially connected to the agenda of recreating the collective self. In 1898 Kaliprasanna Sengupta's lament compared the contemporary Bengali *samaj* to that in the ancient period and highlighted the need for change.¹⁰² Rabindranath Tagore in a

⁹⁹ According to Indira Chowdhury-Sengupta, Bengali intellectuals in the late nineteenth century redefined identity in a hegemonic discourse that upheld a homogenised Hindu identity as Indian identity. See Indira Chowdhury-Sengupta, 'Colonialism and Cultural Identity: The Making of a Hindu Discourse' (unpublished thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, 1993), pp. 12, 22.

¹⁰⁰ Satishchandra Raychaudhuri, *Bangiya Samaj*, p. 306.

¹⁰¹ See Akshoykumar Moitreya, *Sirajuddaula*.

¹⁰² Kaliprasanna Sengupta's article in *Nirmalya* (Bhadra and Ashvin, 1898), mentioned in Satishchandra Raychaudhuri, *Bangiya Samaj*, p. 3.

similar vein, pointed out that present-day Bengalis had a duty toward improving their *samaj*:

The root of social decline lies in the complacent attitude of those who say that *samaj* has been created by our predecessors and we have nothing more to do with it . . . Our ancestors have achieved great things, not because they shone in the reflected glory of their predecessors, but because they mediated . . . and effected changes . . . our minds and hearts must be linked with theirs.¹⁰³

He recommended social improvement along courses charted by ‘our predecessors’, who identified the good of the community with that of the individual. The connection between individual consciousness and social rules would secure co-ordination of the whole and the parts, and awaken a living link between the nation’s past and its present.¹⁰⁴ Writers such as Prasad Das Goswami also sharply counterpoised past and present *samajs*, and attempted to give positive guidelines for the improvement of *samaj*. Referring to *samajs* during the period of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and the Bengali *samaj* during the Vaishnava era, he contrasted past harmony and righteousness to present decline. The crucial flaw, he argued, leading to decline, was the absence of concerted effort among Bengalis to effect improvement.¹⁰⁵

In their endeavour to improve *samaj*, the literati were influenced by a social decline/progress paradigm, which traced the ascent and decline of particular social groups, customs and practices. Bengal became ‘unfortunate’ after social upheaval in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries splintered its unity. The survival of age-old social values in Danujamardan Deb’s Baklanagar Samaj could not entirely contain the downslide of the Bengali *samaj*.¹⁰⁶ Such imaginings had repercussions, which were evident at a much later period also. Locating the cause of disharmony in social decay, Benoy Ghosh remarked on the stagnation in Bengali rural society from “the last years of the Hindu *yuga*”. Skilfully grafting sociological realities on to legend, he posed a significant question:

Long before the Sena regime or the era of the imaginary Adisur Brahmans were residing in Bengal and had sufficiently high social status, but it had not been necessary bring Brahmans from Kanauj and teach them the Vedas and the Vedic customs. Nor had it been necessary to introduce Kulinism as a new social anchorage and an index to Brahmanical dignity and status.

¹⁰³ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Bharatbarshiya Samaj’, *Bangadarshan* (1901), printed in Satyendranath Ray (ed.), *Rabindranather Chintajagal, Samajchinta*, pp. 305–6.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Prasad Das Goswami, *Amader Samaj* (Serampore, 1895), pp. 9, 32–48.

¹⁰⁶ Satishchandra Raychaudhuri, *Bangiya Samaj*, pp. 75–6.

Why was it suddenly necessary to bring five Brahmans from Kanauj and why were Bengali Brahmans no longer well versed in the *shastras* [scriptural books including the Vedas and the *puranas*]?¹⁰⁷

Benoy Ghosh concluded that the idleness and decline of Bengali Brahmans and their incapacity to effect social progress reached a climax towards the end of Sena rule. Forsaking their calling as spiritual teachers, gradually, due to poverty, they turned toward priestly jobs only, but even in this task they could not maintain rules and norms. They took up the professions of other castes. Such stagnation and decay called for new social measures. One of these was Kulinism, introduced to resuscitate the high social position of the Brahmanic *samaj*, verging on the brink of destruction. But it was not possible to stall inner decay by an external regulation. Even Kulinism became an evil. The decline of Kulinism necessitated further social changes. Debibar re-arranged existing Kulin families according to the nature of the blemishes into different endogamous groups called *mel*.¹⁰⁸ The degenerate social condition was worsened by the Muslim onslaught and the religious challenge of Islam. Moreover, the lure of patronage induced many Brahmans to engage in varied duties in the courts of Muslim rulers. This religious and social turmoil has been vividly portrayed in Vaishnava literature and *Mangalkavya*.¹⁰⁹

This portrayal diluted the unifying force that *samaj* was envisaged to have. Connections between the modern nation and the historical society from whence it emerged were, as Prasenjit Duara has expressed, neither 'simple' nor 'continuous'.¹¹⁰ Conscious of these inner ruptures in Bengal's social history, the literati problematised the issue of unity within the context of past turmoil, and then posited it against the current scenario of fragmentation, and shifts in indices of social status. In 1872, the anonymous author of *Hindu Jati* lamented: 'Most of us have forgotten that we are integral parts of the *samaj* and have a special relation to it. Our indifference towards the *samaj* have made us apathetic to the Bengali *jati* also.'¹¹¹ The trope of social

¹⁰⁷ Benoy Ghosh, *Vidyasagar O Bangali Samaj*, p. 91.

¹⁰⁸ Nagendranath Basu contended that Debibar made this arrangement in 1480. Dhruvananda Misra completed the arrangement a few years later, in the *Mahavamsa*, in 1485. These details have been mentioned in *ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Admitting the complexity of these connections and internal breaks helps one avoid being ensnared in myths of a continuous nation which Elie Kedourie warned against. In this context see Prasenjit Duara, 'On Theories of Nationalism for India and China', in Tan Chung (ed.), *In the Footsteps of Xuanzang: Tan Yun-Shan and India*.

¹¹¹ *Hindu Jati*, by an anonymous author (Calcutta, 1872), p. 6.

decline led to unease about the present *samaj*, and a dream for a 'better' *samaj*. The plan for improvement followed the twin trajectories of inculcation of *dharma*, implying the cultivation of certain qualities and social practices, and the inclusion of people who followed these practices within a remodelled Bengali *samaj*.

Crucial in these imaginings was a rethinking of past *samajs* within two contexts. One was turmoil in past *samajs*, as described above. The other, more significant from the viewpoint of the literati's cultural-nationalist agenda, was relating past unity to the present in a way that the past *samajs* served as a model for the improvement of the present *samaj*, and also provided a blueprint for a future 'better' *samaj*. In this utopic construction, nostalgia for the past played a major role, and history and literature intermeshed, for instance, in Mukundaram's portrayals of sixteenth-century Bengali society. These included idyllic pictures of self-sufficient village communities where different castes including 'lower orders' such as the Gandhabaniks, Malakars and Tambulis followed their respective professions and rejoiced in simple amusements.¹¹² In these pictures the idea of the 'lower orders' as a distinct and excluded other had not fully crystallised, a comment on the late nineteenth-century hardening of such divisions. The portrayal has lasted and still serves its purpose as an ideal of social harmony. In 1962, a social historian of Bengal referred to an ancient *samaj*, drawing from Manikchand's *Geet*.¹¹³ His account resonates Mukundaram's views about social harmony resulting from people following their respective caste-based occupations. Such nostalgic representations highlighted certain supposedly enduring bases of *samajik* unity. Pilgrimages, for instance, bound people of different regions by the thread of religious sentiment. Pre-modern sources such as the works of Ketakadas Khemananda, cited by social historians of Bengal, made it clear that pilgrimages were frequently undertaken, especially to Allahabad.¹¹⁴ Also emphasised was the element of liberality, specifically the tolerance of Vaishnavism, which accorded status to 'lower' groups such as the Sahas and non-Aryan merchants in Hindu society.¹¹⁵

¹¹² See J. N. Dasgupta, *Bengal in the Sixteenth Century* (Calcutta, 1914), pp. 160–3, 185.

¹¹³ Sudhir Kumar Mitra, *Hugli Jelar Itihas O Bangasamaj* (Calcutta, 1962), pp. 185–7.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ This spirit of liberality was referred to with substantiating examples in Nagendranath Basu, *Pirali Kanda*, and also in the genealogical work of Debibar and

These conceptions of harmony were redefined during the second half of the nineteenth century, and applied in interesting interrelations between Bengalis and other Indians. Mukundaram's account portrayed Marathas as peaceful citizens, quite different from the plunderers of a later period.¹¹⁶ There was congruence between his account and *Mirat Ahmadi*, a work composed by a historian of Gujarat because both drew from a traditional account long prevalent in India.¹¹⁷ These seem to embody an inherent idea of the Bengali *samaj* as a part of a wider entity. An undercurrent of a syncretic identity is also evident from an earlier genre of self-representation in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Kumkum Chatterjee has drawn attention to an Indo-Islamic genre of histories and treatises.¹¹⁸ Akshoykumar Moitreya also remarked on earlier occasional attempts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century to 'rediscover' the Bengali past on the basis of region-specific history-writing. He considered Saiyad Elahi Baksh Angrejabadi's manuscripts invaluable in this regard.¹¹⁹ Thus aspects of the Bengali *samaj* in the ancient era and during Muslim rule were viewed with the aim of capturing continuities and changes as they unfolded through history.

Conclusion

Samaj therefore became the site where the past, present and future of the *jati* interlocked in a meaningful relationship. As this essay has sought to demonstrate, the idea of *samajik* unity was not an emergent or sudden phenomenon in late colonial Bengal. But it was only during this period that there was a conscious interplay between such ideas and notions about the collective self, reflected in a historically indexed and structured discourse on cultural nationalism. The re-imagination of a future, 'better' *samaj*, was in many ways a utopic construction, dissociated from social actualities such as a realistic integration of the

the Gaudiya section of Vaishnavism. For details see Tamonash Chandra Das Gupta, *Aspects of Bengali Society from Old Bengali Literature* (Calcutta, 1935), pp. 209–21.

¹¹⁶ J.N. Dasgupta, *Bengal in the Sixteenth Century*, p.163. 'Borgis' was the term given to bands of Maratha plunderers who extorted revenue after the Maratha invasion of Bengal during Alivardi Khan's reign.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹¹⁸ Kumkum Chatterjee, 'History as Self-Representation', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, 4 (1998), p. 916.

¹¹⁹ Akshoykumar Moitreya, *Gourer Katha*, p. 39.

'lower orders' and Muslims into the *samaj* through social intermingling. But in the late nineteenth-century context of recasting identity, a dream-arena as the ideological foundation for change was especially significant. History became a theatre of hopes, dreams, and wish-fulfilment. In Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's *Svapnalabdha Bharbarsher Itihas*, a different course of events was played out in the historical landscape. These led on to the ideal of unity that awakened in a new aurora. 'The paintbrush of time on the canvas of eternity moves over the dawns and dusks of eras long gone. Memory follows him, attempting to articulate these portrayals in language.'¹²⁰ The author is the companion of memory and calls himself 'hope'. He traverses with dawn to a brighter tomorrow.¹²¹ Through such imagery and metaphors, dreams, hopes and a wish for a new *samaj* blended in the historical imagination of the Bengali literati.

Thus the evolution of the notion of a nation cannot simply be abstracted from a tradition that went back five hundred years. Indeed, the manifold dimensions and trajectories of the late nineteenth-century Bengali quest for an empowered identity had links with much earlier conceptualisations of *samajik* formation. So a nuanced appreciation of the historical process would require a more coherent investigation located within a longer and more continuous process of the unfolding of identities in Bengal.

¹²⁰ Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, *Svapnalabdha Bharatbarsher Itihas* (Hugli, 1895), p. 61.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.