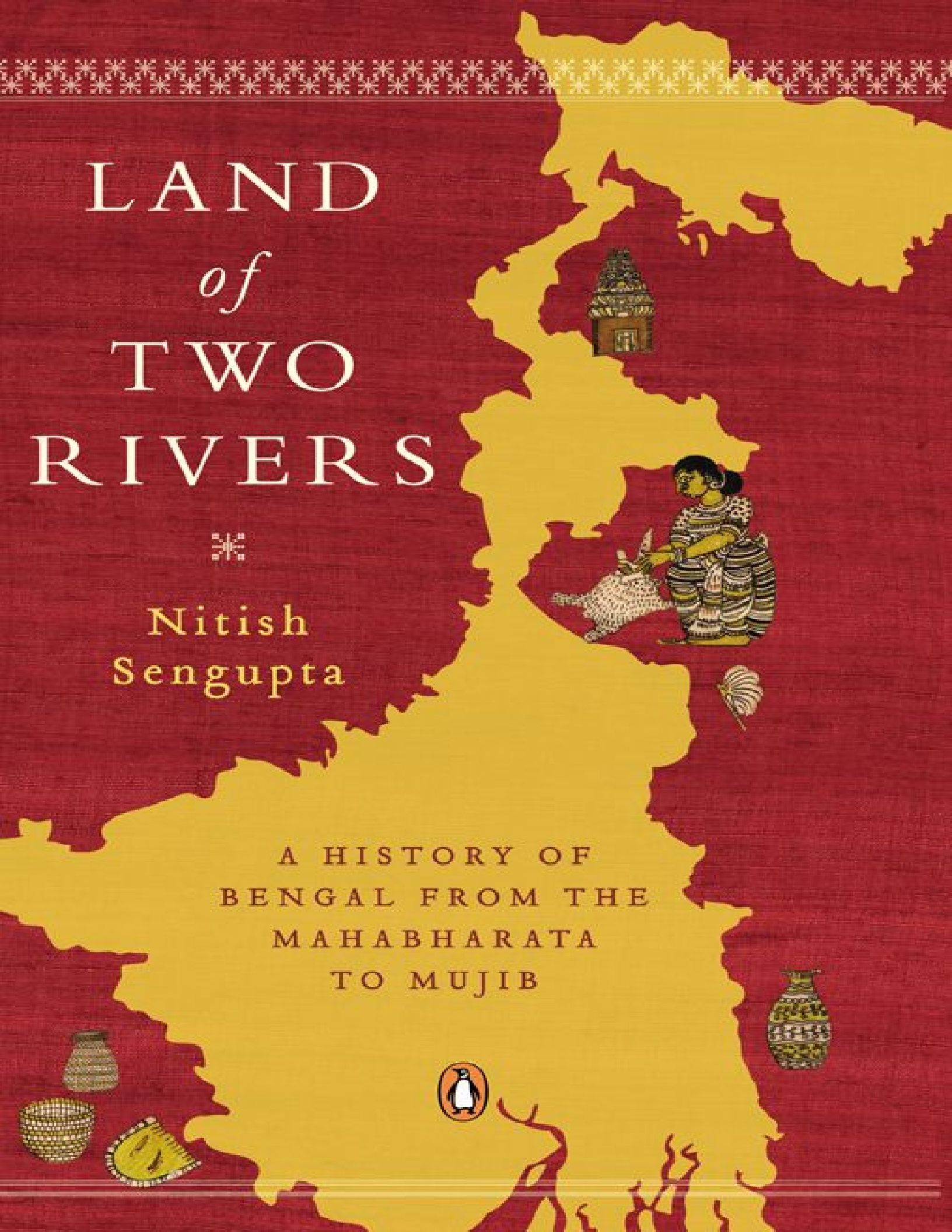
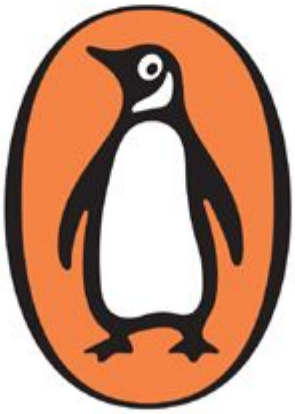
LAND *of* TWO RIVERS



Nitish Sengupta

A HISTORY OF BENGAL FROM THE MAHABHARATA TO MUJIB



Penguin

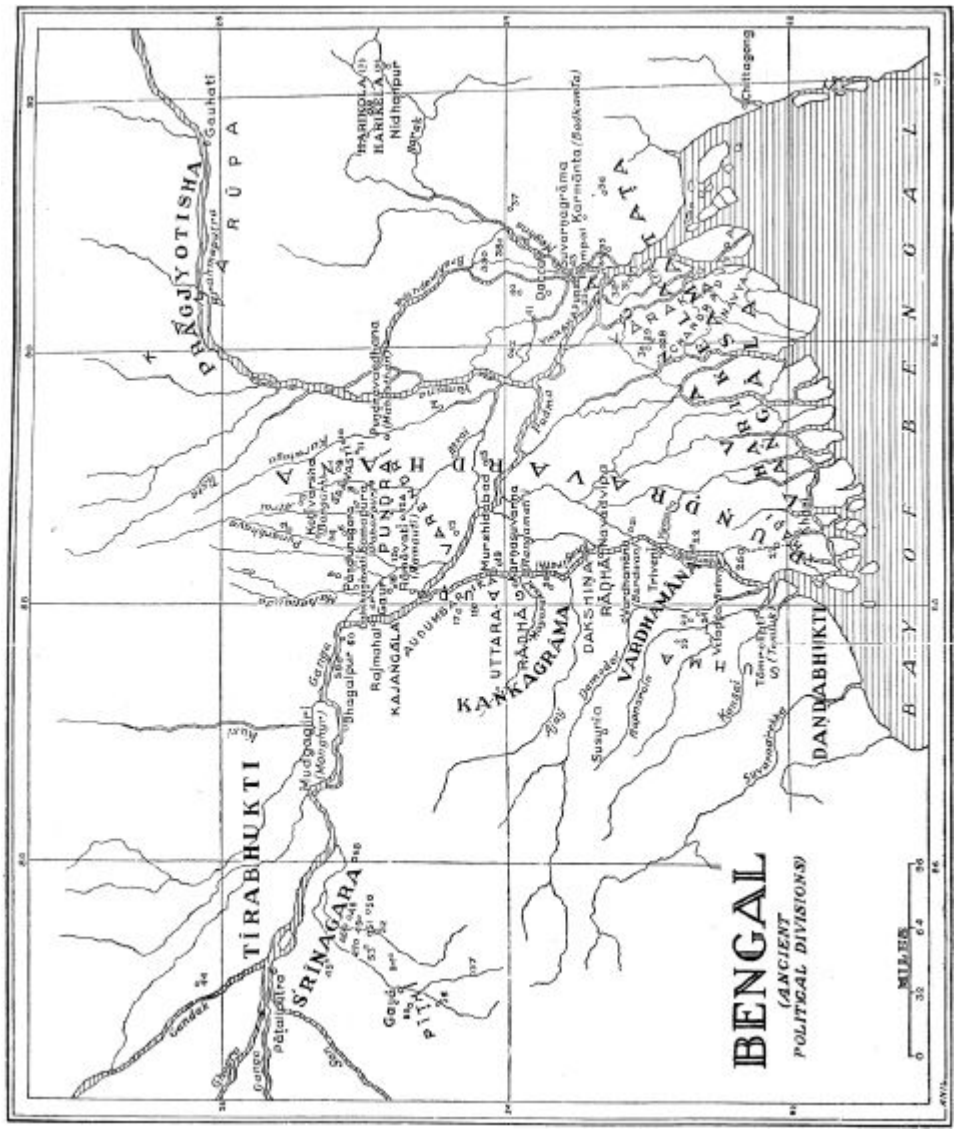
NITISH SENGUPTA

Land of Two Rivers

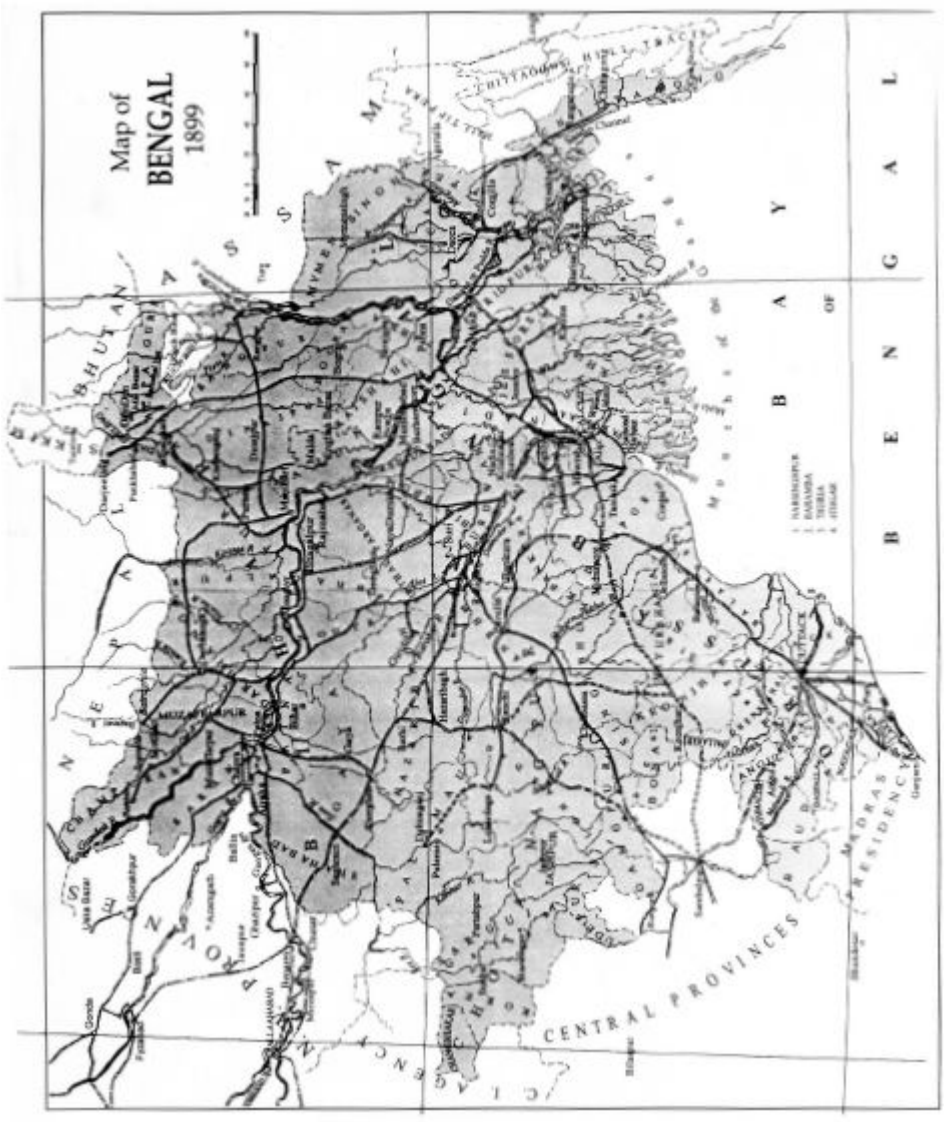
A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib

PENGUIN BOOKS

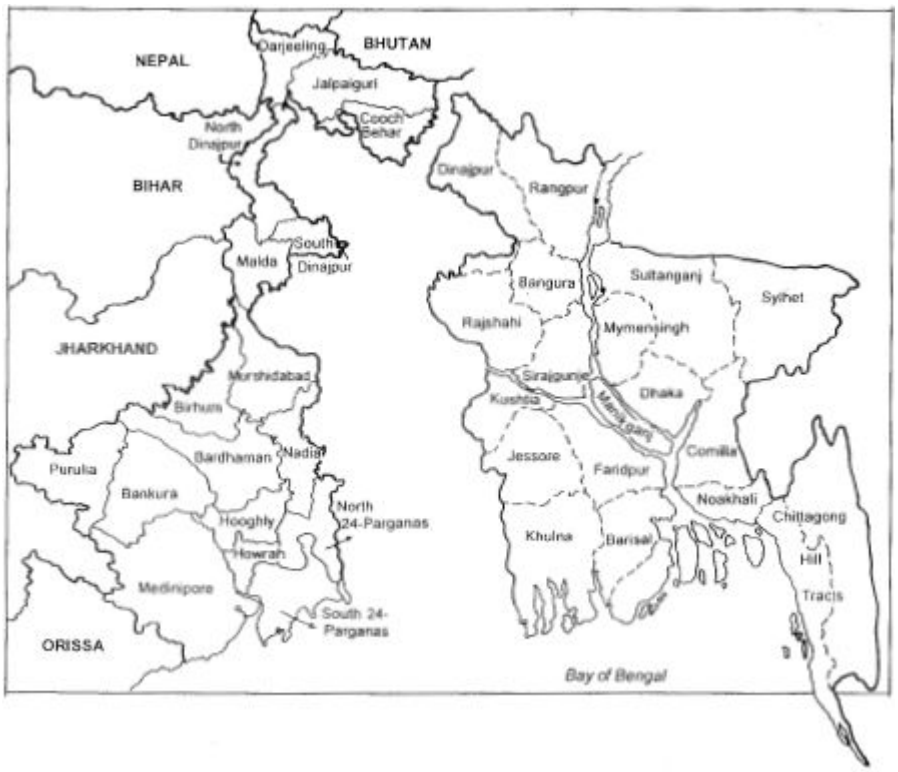
Contents



The unique formation of the Gangetic delta with the two rivers, Ganga and Brahmaputra, created a land that became as enviable for its richness of learning and culture as for its prosperity.



The large—according to some administrators, 'unmanageable'—province of Bengal included Bihar and Orissa as well before its first partition in 1905.



The split of the two Bengals became formalized with the Partition in 1947, when West Bengal (on the left) became a state within the Indian Union and East Bengal, a province of Pakistan. Eventually, Bangladesh (on the right) declared its independence from Pakistan's exploitative administration in 1971.

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Bengal Renaissance

The nineteenth-century Bengal Renaissance was the product of a variety of circumstances: the advent of settled British rule, the so-called Pax Britannica, the economic boom brought about by the growth of Calcutta as a major world hub of industry, the introduction of English education and, along with it, the influence of Western science and philosophy, the revival of the study of ancient Indian Sanskrit literature and philosophy, and the growth of a new middle class and a professional class. It was indeed a remarkable phenomenon of which there are few parallels in history of a small region blossoming into a whole range of creative activities—literary, cultural, social and economic. It produced a large number of stalwarts who changed the face of Bengal.

Renaissance means rebirth and is used in European history in the context of the revival of the Greco-Roman learning in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, after a long winter of the dark medieval period. For historians like Burchardt, Michelet and Symonds, who specially studied this phenomenon, it was a total transformation of lifestyle, a new humanism reflected in arts, literature and attitude to life, and a new value system. Whether this value system could be transported to other countries or cultures, as Burchardt felt it could be, is a debatable question. But surely nineteenth-century Bengal was as close an approximation to fifteenth-century Italy as it could be although no two nations in history can ever be identical. A serious comparison was started by the dramatis personae of the Bengal Renaissance themselves—intellectual leaders like Keshab Chandra Sen, Bipin Chandra Pal, and later on by M.N. Roy in *India in Transition*. In comparatively recent times came the study by Susobhan Sarkar (initially

under the pseudonym 'Amit Sen')—*Notes on the Bengal Renaissance*—by far the most comprehensive and objective scholarly analysis of the period.

For about a century, Bengal's conscious awareness of the changing modern world was more developed than and ahead of that of the rest of India. The role played by Bengal in the modern awakening of the subcontinent is thus comparable to the position occupied by Italy in the European Renaissance. It is described in a different vein, but very forcefully, by Jadunath Sarkar in his *History of Bengal*, Vol. 2:

> If Periclean Athens was the school of Hellas, the eye of Greece, mother of arts and eloquence, that was Bengal to the rest of India under British rule, but with a borrowed light which it had made its own with marvellous cunning. In this new Bengal originated every good and great thing of the modern world that passed on to the other provinces of India. From Bengal went forth the English-educated teachers and the European-inspired thought that helped to modernize Bihar and Orissa, Hindustan and the Deccan. New literary types, reform of language, social reconstruction, political aspirations, religious movements and even changes in manners that originated in Bengal, passed like ripples from a central eddy, across provincial barriers, to the farthest corners of India … It was truly a renaissance, wider, deeper and more revolutionary than that of Europe after the fall of Constantinople.

Also, Bengal produced in about three quarters of a century a large number of luminaries which few countries had produced in history in such a short period. This great movement started around the 1820s and continued till the first two decades of the next century. It can be said to have gradually petered out thereafter. For this great phenomenon, the Bengalees as a race cannot claim any special credit. They became the beneficiaries of a conjunction of developments with which time endowed them, and therefore, played their history-directed role as change agents during the century.

It has been said in recent times that the Bengal Renaissance was not a movement of mass awakening in the sense in which the Italian Renaissance was one. Also, it was not quite like the Italian Renaissance in which the revival of ancient Greek and Roman learning played a major role. But this is not an entirely accurate appreciation. Neither the Italian Renaissance nor the French Revolution were mass movements in the sense that all sections of the population were moved by them. The Italian Renaissance was certainly confined only to the upper classes and to the towns, and did not

affect the masses at large; but it affected the people who mattered. In this sense, the nineteenth-century renaissance in Bengal was no less a peoples' movement. However, the Bengal Renaissance suffered from two great limitations. First, it was primarily an upper-class movement and did not percolate downwards to the common people. Thus, it had a very narrow social base. The peasantry and the working classes remained untouched except in isolated cases. Secondly, the Muslims who had replaced the Hindus as the majority community around the same time when the gigantic thought movement was taking place were, by and large, outside the main focus of this ferment except in the fringes. It was only during the earlier years of the twentieth century that substantial sections were drawn into it. Though the nineteenth-century renaissance was the culmination of the process of emergence of the cultural characteristics of the Bengalee people that had started in the age of Hussain Shah, it remained predominantly Hindu and was only partially Muslim. On the whole, it remained an elitist movement restricted to the Hindu bhadralok (gentry) and zamindars.

Some indirect influence did trickle down to people lower down, but this was not strong enough to really transform the lower classes into modern elements in a renascent society. This was noticed by perceptive thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore and Vivekananda. In his *Ghare Baire* Tagore showed how the national movement had an extremely narrow social base and failed to enthuse the common masses. In a remarkable statement, Vivekananda observed that the reform movement of the nineteenth century had limited social impact, affecting only a fraction of the populace; and as long as the common masses were not enthused by the spread of education and awakening among them, the reform movement in various aspects like sati abolition or widow remarriage was bound to be a microscopic phenomenon. From a strictly Marxist historian's point of view, the renaissance was a movement confined within the bourgeois class. But then, how broad-based by this yardstick was the European Renaissance of the fifteenth century? Was it also not confined, by and large, to the middle classes or the bourgeoisie in towns and only a section of clerical scholars? How many of the peasants or the artisans in the towns could be said to have been truly

influenced by the gigantic intellectual and social movement? From this point of view, one cannot minimize the importance of the nineteenth-century Bengal Renaissance in history. With all its deficiencies, it was a great intellectual and social upheaval which did take the society in Bengal forward very significantly and made for an all-round transformation.

The Bengal Renaissance reached its climax in Rabindranath Tagore and, after drawing in sections of the Bengalee Muslim upper and middle classes —although many of them differed politically from their Hindu compatriots —meandered along and eventually petered out, but not before it had uplifted and emancipated the Bengalee people in a dramatic and comprehensive manner. For those who only know the Bengalee society after Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Vivekananda it is difficult to realize the low levels to which the Bengalee Hindu society had sunk before these reformers came on the scene. The growth of a large number of sects like Kartabhaja and various tantrik and *bairagi* groups encouraged loose morals and permissiveness in the spiritual garb of Vedantic unity. The society was characterized by the most oppressive form of tyranny and exploitation by the upper castes, the denial of an honourable status to women, the prevalence of evil practices like sati and all sorts of superstitious beliefs and practices, polygamy, untouchability, prostitution and permissiveness, widespread drinking, slavery in its cruellest form and the prevalence of pseudo-religious practices like *charakmela*, child marriage, and the compulsion of wasting money beyond what a person could afford on functions like *shradh*, births, marriages and Durgapuja. To know how degrading Hindu society in Bengal had become one needs to go through *A Survey of the Contemporary Hindu Society and Religion* by W. Ward, one of the Serampore trilogy written in 1818. This depicts a deplorably low level of the then Hindu society. All this changed dramatically in one generation, thanks to the leaders of the great nineteenth-century Renaissance in Bengal, who took many pioneering steps, such as Vidyasagar's heroic struggle for widow remarriage, Brahmo Samaj's efforts for women education and uplift, and the attempts to eradicate the evils of caste system.

The Great Pioneer and Helmsman

The Bengal Renaissance started with Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), in many respects the founder of the movement, and ended with Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). According to Susobhan Sarkar in his *Notes on the Bengal Renaissance*, this great movement can be divided into five parts:

(i) From 1815, when Raja Rammohan Roy settled in Calcutta and launched his academic and reformation blitzkrieg, till 1833 when he died. There would be several other years which would be strong contenders for the title of zero year, e.g. 1817, the year of founding of Hindu College and the School Book Society by David Hare, or 1826 when Derozio started his career as a teacher in Hindu College and shortly afterwards launched his famous Academic Association.
(ii) From 1833 to 1857—from Raja Rammohan's death to the great upheaval of 1857.
(iii) From 1857 (the great revolt) to 1885 (the founding of Indian National Congress).
(iv) From 1885 to 1905, i.e., from the establishment of the Congress to the first partition of Bengal.
(v) From 1905 to 1919—from partition and the swadeshi movement to the non-cooperation movement and the advent of Mahatma Gandhi's overwhelming leadership.

After Rabindranath Tagore the renaissance period can be said to have ended although a large number of stalwarts still remained in the firmament radiating their creative talents, e.g. Abanindranath Tagore, Satyen Bose, Satyajit Ray, Muztaba Ali, Humayun Kabir.

Raja Rammohan Roy has been aptly described as the 'first modern man of modern India' by K.M. Pannikar and 'one of the greatest benefactors of mankind' by Romain Rolland. He was born in 1772 in the small village of Radhanagar in Hooghly district and grew up in an environment which was medieval and decadent. He was sent to Patna to study Arabic and Persian and, thereafter, to Benares for studying Sanskrit and the Upanishdic philosophy. But he had serious disagreement with his father on the observance of rituals and left home. Even after his father's death in 1803 there was no reconciliation with the family. Later he moved to Benares and to Murshidabad, the capital of Bengal, where he brought out his first book entitled *Tuhf-ul-Muwahuddin* (A Gift to Monotheists), which was very much influenced by Islamic monotheism transplanted against his

Upanishadic background. Then followed about ten years of service under the East India Company under various collectors, among them John Digby, the collector of Rangpur, who was the first proponent of the theory of drainage of wealth from Bengal. In between, Roy also studied English and Western philosophy and carried on a relentless controversy with the orthodox Hindu pundits. In his teachings he referred directly to the Upanishads with emphasis on one Supreme God and the right of man to directly approach the Godhead without the medium of the priests and their meaningless rituals.

By 1815, he took retirement from the government and settled in Calcutta after several fruitless attempts at reconciliation with his mother and brothers. A significant incident in his early life, viz., the forcible burning of the widow of his dead brother on the funeral pyre by the relatives had made a great impact on Rammohan Roy's mind. He took a vow that he would never rest until this inhuman practice of sati was abolished. After settling down in Calcutta he published some of the Upanishadic and Vedic sutras in Bengali at his own expense so that people could directly read the shastras instead of depending on the Brahman priests. In this respect, his role in Bengal was similar to that of Guru Nanak in Punjab. In 1817 he published in English a work named *Defence of Hindu Theism*. He also learnt Greek and Hebrew and commenced translating the original Gospels into Bengali. In 1820 he published *The Precepts of Jesus*: *The Guide to Peace and Happiness*. He now had a new enemy—the Christian clergy who objected to his interpretation of the teachings of Jesus. The Baptist missionaries of Serampore attacked him with vehemence.

Rammohan Roy carried on a lifelong crusade in favour of emancipation of women, referring to ancient shastras to show how women enjoyed freedom in ancient India. He vigorously opposed the precepts of Manu and advocated complete equality of women in terms of education, right to property and other rights. His biggest achievement was the great public campaign he started against the inhuman practice of sati and the success he achieved when the government passed a law banning this evil practice. There was hardly any aspect of life that Rammohan Roy did not take up;

advocating rights of women in education and property, pressing for the citizens' inherent right for freedom of speech and the freedom of the press, the right of deprived castes to social equality and better treatment, the right of the agriculturists to freedom from excessive renting, equal treatment of white and coloured races, and the right of all subject people to freedom. He started two fiery journals, *Sambad Kaumudi* and *Miratul-khabar* (in Persian). He also wrote in Bengali and was one of the founders of modern Bengali prose. He established several educational institutions, sometimes with the help of Christian missionaries. He was one of the pioneers of the famous Hindu College which was set up in 1817 but, with his characteristic wisdom, he voluntarily agreed to withdraw his name from the list of promoters to make sure that orthodox Hindus did not oppose the establishment of this college on the ground of his being one of the promoters.

Rammohan Roy may also be called the 'Father of Indian Politics', but his politics was far away from the concept of freedom of the country, was truly cosmopolitan, and supported freedom everywhere in the world, irrespective of the barriers of race, creed, colour or country. Whether it was the fight for freedom of the people of Naples or Ireland or the anti-Spanish rebels in Latin America, the French revolutionaries of 1830 or establishment of constitutional government in Spain, his active sympathies were with all such movements for freedom and against oppression.

He took a fearless stand against the 1823 ordinance, which forbade the publication of a newspaper without prior licence from the government. He also opposed the Jury Act of 1827 which discriminated against local people. He fought for the rights of landholders against an oppressive regulation in 1828 that sanctioned arbitrary disposition of land by the landlords. His answers to the numerous questions put to him during his stay in England by the Select Committee of the House of Commons on a variety of subjects reveal not only his deep knowledge of administration and its working in the country, but also deep sympathy for the common people.

Along with fighting for the rights of the landholders, Rammohan Roy was conscious of the miserable plight to which the peasantry had been

reduced under the Permanent Settlement. He therefore wrote with equal vehemence against the exploitation of the ryots. He pleaded for amelioration of the poverty of the ryots and the conferment on them of their legitimate rights over the land they tilled. This was long before socialism made its advent in India. He had a vision of the dynamic role of the middle class. In his journal, the *Bengal Herald*, he wrote:

> A class of society has sprung into existence that was unknown before. These are placed between aristocracy and the poor and are daily forming a most influential class—it is a dawn of a new era. Whenever such an order of men has been created freedom has followed in its train … these middle class of inhabitants of Bengal afford the most cheering indication of any that exists at the present moment.

Rammohan Roy also left his mark in history as a pioneer of the Brahmo Samaj. Deep in his mind was the desire to bring together all those who believed in worshipping only one God common to votaries of all religions rather than only for the so-called believers. In 1815 he informally organized an Atmiya Sabha, an inner circle of liberal-minded friends who used to gather together at regular intervals and discuss spiritual matters. Slowly he gravitated towards bringing together people of all races and creeds on a common platform of worshipping one God. His efforts culminated in establishing a temple of universal worship on 23 January 1830. This was the beginning of the Brahmo Samaj movement, although Rammohan Roy never intended it to be a separate movement outside Hindu society. He called his organization the 'Brahmo Sabha', i.e., the meeting of those who believed in Upanishadic Supreme God and not in the so-called gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon, which to his mind was a degradation of the original essence of Vedantism. He tried to restore the pristine glory of Vedantic monotheism influenced by the West's rational philosophy and science, and by Islamic monotheism and brotherhood. Apart from his strong feelings against idol worship and priestly rituals he did not want to split Hindu society and preferred to carry on a sort of protestant movement within the parent society. It was only later that the Brahmo Sabha became the 'Brahmo Samaj' and assumed the character of a separate religious sect,

some of whose members claimed themselves to be non-Hindus. Even a formal process of initiation into Brahmoism came into being.

Rammohan Roy's crusading zeal in preserving the gains of abolishing sati and undertaking other reforms encouraged him to go to England in the last phase of his life when an opportunity arose. Also, the East India Company's charter was due for renewal in 1833 and this would provide an opportunity for projecting before the Parliament the need for safeguarding the rights and privileges of the Indian people. The Mughal Emperor of Delhi, Akbar II, requested Rammohan Roy to place his grievances before the King of Great Britain for redress. Rammohan Roy was appointed Imperial Envoy to the British Court with the title of Raja. He sailed from Calcutta on board the *Albion* on 15 November 1831 and landed in Liverpool on 8 December. In a way this visit itself was his rebuff to the orthodox tradition which forbade sea voyages. During his two years' sojourn in England Rammohan Roy made a profound impression on the intellectual and aristocratic sections in Britain.

Rammohan Roy, during these two years, did much more than discharging the counsel's role for the Mughal emperor. He threw himself in all seriousness into great political movements of the day. He presented before the House of Commons a counter-petition against the renewal of sati. He was invited to give evidence before the Select Committee of the House of Commons to consider the renewal of the East India Company's charter in 1833. In a series of communications to the East India Company, he expressed his authoritative views on the conditions of people of India and the revenue and judicial systems of the country. That the 1833 charter converted the East India Company from a trading concern into a governing body was in no small measure due to his efforts. He took keen interest in the passage of the First Reforms Act (1832) which converted England into a true democracy. The East India Company formally entertained him at a dinner. Also, at the coronation of King George IV, he was placed among foreign ambassadors. King William IV gave him a formal audience and so did King Louis Phillipe of France in 1832 in Paris. The Royal Asiatic Society and the British Unitarian Society invited Raja Rammohan Roy to

speak at their various annual functions. All this strain told on his health and he died after a short illness at Bristol on 27 September 1833, but not before he had awakened and galvanized the educated masses in Bengal as never before and paved the foundation for the great renaissance of the nineteenth century.

In recent times there have been some regrettable attempts by a section of self-declared progressive scholars to criticize both the Bengal Renaissance and its principal star, Raja Rammohan Roy. Bengal Renaissance has been criticized on account of its limited class character and its loyalism to the British Raj, and Rammohan Roy on a charge of essentially reflecting landlord and bourgeois class interests. Both must be dismissed with the contempt they deserve. No serious student of history treats the Italian Renaissance and the Bengal Renaissance as identical happenings. There were qualitative differences between the two, depending on the distinct historical backgrounds. But if one has to be critical of the Bengal Renaissance because of its limited upper-class character, one should also note that the Italian Renaissance was no less so. It was confined to the upper class of society and contained many who were as partisan as some of those who were the main dramatis personae during the Bengal Renaissance.

It is important to note in passing several of Rammohan Roy's contemporaries, some of them his strong supporters, others bitter critics of his thoughts and reforms. Among his strong supporters was Dwarkanath Tagore (1794–1846), Rabindranath Tagore's grandfather, who represented the new aristocracy based on business and stood by Rammohan Roy in all his reform activities although he never formally joined the Brahmo Sabha. Another supporter was David Hare (1775–1842), the Scottish watchmaker who left his trade in 1816 and established a network of schools and educational bodies, notably the Hindu College (1817), the School Book Society (1818) and the Medical College (1835) and devoted his entire life to bringing up a whole generation of educated Bengalee young men till he died in 1842. In some respects he stood between Rammohan Roy and Derozio. Before Hare was struck down by cholera in 1841 he had created a network of formal Western-style education and earned tremendous goodwill

among the people of Calcutta, so much so that even a century and a quarter later, when there was a general movement for removal of statues of the British from public places none would touch David Hare's statue.

DEROZIO

The Iconoclast and the Stormy Petrel of Young Bengal

A diametrically opposite side of the Renaissance was illustrated in the life and work of Derozio, an Anglo-Portuguese, who was a firebrand poet and a strong critic of the norms and practices of the decadent Bengal society of his times. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1808–32), by far the strangest figure in the Bengal Renaissance, was educated in a school run by the Scotsman Drummond, a poet and scholar, in Dharmatala Street of Calcutta. He developed an interest in English poetry and philosophy and became a poet in his own right. Derozio was a child prodigy and imbibed the philosophical traditions of the West and the ideas of the French Revolution. After finishing school and a spell of clerkship in his father's office, Derozio blossomed into a poet contributing to the *Indian Gazette*. One of his early works was the *Fakir of Jhungeera* in which he struck a patriotic note which was not only astonishing for a European, but extremely rare for his age even among educated Indians:

> My country! in the days of glory past
> A beauteous halo circled around thy brow
> And worshipped as a deity you wast,
> Where is that glory where that reverence now?

Appointed to Hindu College as a teacher in May 1826 on the basis of his fame as a poet and a scholar of philosophy, he very soon attracted to himself a number of upper-class boys who adored him and were deeply influenced by his freethinking and free expressions. They frequently visited his house and used to celebrate their emancipation by taking forbidden food and drink. These excesses would shake Rammohan Roy's sense of propriety and decency, but they had an incidental role in shaking the orthodox society of those times. Derozio started the Academic Association with a monthly

journal, *Athenium*, in which both he and his friends and students published articles ridiculing Hinduism and its practices. He is also said to have edited *Calcutta Literary Gazette* and another journal called *Hesperus*.

An insight into the young teacher's mind is provided by the following lines from one of his poems:

> Expanding like petals of young
> I watch the gentle opening of your minds
> And the sweet loosening of the spell that binds
> Your intellectual energies and powers.
> What joyance rains upon me when I see
> Fame in the mirror of futurity.
> Weaving the chaplets you have yet to gain,
> And when I feel I have not lived in vain.

To quote Radhanath Sikdar, one of his disciples, known more for his measuring the height of Mount Everest, 'He has been the cause and the sole cause of that spirit of inquiry after truth and that contempt of vice which cannot but be beneficial to India.' Derozio preached against the existence of God, about the evils of idolatry and priestcraft, the necessity of inexpensive justice, the evil effects of colonialism and the significance of the July Revolution of 1830 in France. Needless to say that all this antagonized the orthodox sections in society.

Things were coming to a head. Newspapers like *Sambad Prabhakar* and *Samachar Chandrika* started a tirade against the wayward firangee atheist. Stories were carried by word of mouth about how one student, when asked to pay homage before Goddess Kali one morning, greeted the image with the words 'Good morning, Madam'. Also, another refused to swear by the holy Ganga water in a court. The addiction to alcoholic drinks of many Derozians became a subject of widespread gossip. Eventually, a special meeting of the directors of Hindu College decided on 23 April 1831: 'Derozio being the root of all evils and the cause of public alarm, should be discharged from the college; that all those students who are publicly hostile to Hinduism and the established customs of the country should be turned out; that if any of the boys goes to see or attend public lectures he should be dismissed.' The resolution also condemned the attempt to unsettle the

beliefs of the boys in the great principles of national religion and condemned the practices inconsistent with Hindu notion of propriety.

On Wilson's suggestion, in a compromise bid, Derozio sent a resignation letter in which he stated that 'unexamined, and unheard, you resolve to dismiss me without even the mockery of a trial'. His answer to the question whether he had undermined his pupils' faith in God epitomizes the spirit of the Young Bengal component of the Bengal Renaissance:

> If it be wrong to speak to all upon such a subject, I am guilty, for I am neither afraid nor ashamed to confess having stated the doubts of philosophers upon his head, because I have also stated the solution of those doubts. Is it forbidden anywhere to argue upon such a question? If so, it must be equally wrong to adduce an argument upon either side, or is it consistent with an enlightened notion of truth to wed ourselves to any one view of so important a subject, resolving to close our eyes and ears against all impressions that oppose themselves to it?

Derozio was compelled to leave the college, but the spell he had cast on his students persisted. He himself remained active and established a daily, the *East Indian*, in which he preached amity between the Anglo-Indian community and other Indians, and attacked the celebration of Durgapuja by Prasanna Kumar Tagore who called himself the follower of the theistic Rammohan. On 17 December 1831 he was struck down with cholera at the age of twenty-four and died on Christmas Eve (24 December 1832). Derozio—philosopher, a successful teacher and a notorious freethinker of his times—did not live and die like an average Eurasian of his age, unknown to posterity. But in a short life of intense activity he galvanized the intellectual and academic life of Calcutta of those days as few have done in history. His students in the Hindu College, only slightly younger in age, challenged the established beliefs and practices, questioned the very basis of the society that had remained unchanged for many centuries and wanted to resuscitate it on the basis of Western science and rationalist philosophy. This provoked a sharp orthodox reaction. But before he died Derozio witnessed the beginning of the crumbling of the bastion of conservatism brick by brick, and the dawn of Bengal Renaissance. His students carried on a crusade for reform through an English periodical, the *Inquirer*, a Bengali one, *Jnananveshan*, and two associations, the older

Academic Association (till 1839) and the Epistolary Association, a newer body.

Some of his students like Krishnamohan Banerji and Mahesh Chandra Ghosh sought refuge in conversion to Christianity. Krishnamohan became Christian in 1832 and a Christian missionary in 1837, but kept his radical thoughts alive. Some of them like Rasik Mallik gravitated to government jobs open to Indians after the Charter Act of 1833.

The Young Bengal arranged a series of anti-slavery public lectures by George Thompson, a progressive British politician. Some of the Derozians can be traced in the founding of the Bengal British Indian Society in 1843 and the British Indian Association in 1851, the two earliest examples of political association in India.

The Derozians were ridiculed by contemporary traditionalists. While some questioned their sincerity and integrity, it became almost a tradition to belittle Young Bengal as a trend. Rajnarayan Basu's dry comment in 1875 that 'the light from the West had turned their heads' can be taken as the representative opinion of contemporaries on Young Bengal.

The charge of extreme Anglicism has also been overemphasized. Besides the cliché of a sudden exposure to the wealth of advanced Western rational philosophy and science, there is enough evidence that the Derozians did not forsake their country or people as so many later 'Anglicized' Indians did. It was Derozio's patriotism which stirred Young Bengal minds; Krishnamohan showed fierce patriotism even as a Christian priest. Peareychand Mitra in 1846 pleaded for the protection of ryots and argued at the level of theory that 'it is private property which gives rise to government, and not government to private property' (echoing Locke's thought introduced by Derozio) and that 'the opulent and powerful do not require so much of its constant care and anxiety as the poor and the helpless'.

The Academic Association was kept alive till about 1839. David Hare accepted its presidentship after Derozio. Ramgopal Ghosh and Radhanath Sikdar recorded experiences and reflections in the form of diaries, and the former's house was the regular headquarters for the circle of friends. On 20

February 1838 was launched the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge with the Derozian Tarachand Chakrabarti as president, Ramgopal Ghosh as vice-president and Peareychand Mitra and Ramtanu Lahiri as secretaries. The society elected David Hare as honorary visitor. It published three volumes of papers read between 1840 and 1843 including the *Nature of Historical Studies and Civil and Social Reform* (Krishnamohan); *Interests of the Female Sex* and the *State of Hinduism* in five parts (Peareychand); *Sketch of Bankuja* (Harachandra Ghosh); *Notice of Tipperah, a New Spelling Book* and *Notices of Chittagong* in four parts (Gobindachandra Basak). In 1844 Kishorichand Mitra founded The Philanthropic Society.

We need also to emphasize the contribution of Derozians to the Bengali language. *Jnananveshan* was published partly in Bengali. Ramgopal hailed the Bengali prose of the *Tattvabodhini Patrika*. Peareychand and Radhanath, two intimate friends, brought out the *Masik Patrika*, a monthly magazine in simple colloquial Bengali, understandable by ordinary housewives. Finally, Peareychand ('Tekchand') Thakur was an important contributor to Bengali literature in both the popular and the scholarly styles.

The accusation of being irreligious is again not entirely correct. The Derozian aim was in truth 'to summon Hinduism to the bar of reason'. As early as 1832, Maheshchandra and Krishnamohan turned Christian; Sibchandra in later life became the president of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj and Ramtanu Lahiri was drawn to the same faith. The Derozian criticism of early Brahmoism was not pointless. Krishnamohan commented that it came 'as far as half the way in religion and politics'. Radhanath's decision, in the teeth of family opposition, not to marry a minor wife and saintly Ramtanu's heroic renunciation of the 'sacred thread' were cases in point.

Many of Young Bengal's true limitations were not peculiarly its own, but shared by the entire Bengal Renaissance. The educated community of the nineteenth century failed to see the exploitative character of the foreign rule in India, looking mainly at its immediate benefits. The protagonists of our 'awakening' had little understanding of the toiling, exploited masses who

lived worlds apart. The obsession with Hindu traditions kept at a distance the entire Muslim community who only watched silently. Those narrow class aspects of this renaissance heritage seriously handicapped the democratic progress of the country. The real failure of the Young Bengal movement was the failure to build up a sustained mass movement. Thus Young Bengal remained more in the nature of an episode in Bengal's history rather than a self-sustaining, continuing movement. In the light of such reflection, one can at least appreciate the balanced assessment of Kishorichand Mitra in 1861: 'The youthful band of reformers who had been educated at the Hindoo College, like the tops of Kanchenjungha, were the first to catch and reflect the dawn.'[1]

SPREAD OF WESTERN EDUCATION

In the transition from medieval to modern Bengal, the spread of the English language and, for that matter, Western education played a very important catalytic role. The establishment of British rule made it necessary for Bengalees to learn English. Initially, the government did not play a very active role in promoting English language and Western learning. It patronized colleges that taught Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian and, in fact, established new ones. The work of propagating English was taken up by Christian missionaries who often learnt Bengali and incidentally encouraged local people to learn English in the process of preaching Christianity. The first English school was established in Calcutta in 1731, twenty-six years before the Battle of Plassey, by the Presbyterian Church. A few other missionary schools were also set up where English was taught along with the Bible and some lessons in Western sciences and arts. However, many professional Bengalees, through their contacts with the British or through the opportunity provided by their professional activities, learnt English. Some well-known examples were Dwarkanath Tagore, grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore, Prasanna Kumar Tagore, a well-known lawyer of that time, Neelmani Dutta, a banian of an English firm and his son Rashomoy Dutta who became a judge of the small causes court in

Calcutta. The establishment of the Supreme Court and the growth of the legal profession also helped the spread of the English language and knowledge of British law. Slowly, the number of missionary schools that taught English grew in Calcutta and other towns. In 1800 Jagamohan Basu started an English school in Bhawanipore and an Englishman by the name of Drummond started the Dharmatala Academy soon afterwards. Drummond was a rationalist who influenced his students deeply. Among them was Derozio. In 1814 another English school was established at Chinsurah by Forbes, the district magistrate.

Interestingly, attempts by the well-known missionary William Carey to start a primary school in Calcutta shortly after his arrival in 1793 met with hostility from the East India Company, which did not want missionaries to preach their religion and thereby antagonize indigenous people against British rule. Carey shifted to Serampore, which was under the control of the Danes in 1800. He was joined by two other missionaries of the Baptist Church—Joshua Marshman and William Ward. The three came to be known in the history of Bengal as the 'Serampore Trinity'. They started a school and compiled a book on Sanskrit and Bengali grammar. They also started a printing press in Bengali, the first of its kind, with the help of a Bengalee blacksmith called Panchanan Karmakar. This printing press rolled out many books, not only on Christianity, but also on literature and science. As a result of Carey's efforts, schools were established at Hooghly, Jessore and Dinajpur. In these schools, in order to make up for the paucity of teachers, senior students were often encouraged to teach students of the junior classes. This practice came to be known as the Bell system, named after its originator Andrew Bell. By 1817, more than 100 schools of this type had been started and about 6,700 students studied in these schools.

The monthly government grant of Rs 600 to a school, started by Robert May of the London Missionary Society at Chinsurah, was the first example of government aid to schools in Bengal under British rule. May established thirty-six schools before he died in 1818. In 1816 the Free Missionary Society started a school at Kidderpore and around the same time Captain Stuart started some schools in Burdwan, followed by several other schools

at other places. A society for promoting Christian theology that came into being around the same time also established a number of schools in Calcutta and its suburbs. These schools numbered sixteen by 1823. In all these schools English was taught as a compulsory subject from the primary level, although in some of them the medium of instruction was Bengali. In these schools students were also taught arithmetic, history, geography, science and Western literature, according to modern teaching methods. While preaching the superiority of Christianity, the worship of Hindu gods and goddesses and social customs and practices of the Hindu society were criticized in an indirect and subtle manner.

In 1817 the School Book Society was set up with the objective of printing and publishing of English and Bengali school textbooks. These books were priced low and were sometimes even distributed free. The other key society that was established in 1818 was the Calcutta School Society, with the objective of improving the quality of the books used in *pathshala*s in Calcutta. David Hare, as already noted, a Scottish watchmaker who abandoned his profession to take on the mission of spreading modern education among the Bengalees, played a leading role in the activities of the society. Interestingly, there was a move among a section of the local people to set up separate schools almost in competition to meet the challenge of missionary schools. Many zamindars set up their own schools. Sometimes villagers came forward to construct school buildings with their donations. Leaders of society like Radhakanta Dev, Kali Sankar Ghoshal and Rashmony Dutta made handsome contributions towards the maintenance of missionary schools.

The establishment of the Hindu College in 1817 was a very important landmark. It was the result of a great collective effort by a number of leaders of the then Calcutta Society along with some officials, who came together with support from the authorities. A meeting was convened by Hyde, chief justice of the Supreme Court, on 14 May 1816, which was attended by over fifty prominent Hindu gentlemen including some Sanskrit scholars. At the meeting donations of about Rs 50,000 were collected and a decision was taken to purchase land and construct a building. Among the

subjects to be taught would be 'the Bengali and English languages in particular; next the Hindustani tongue as convenient [sic] in the upper provinces; and then Persian, if desired, as ornamental; general duty to God, the English system of morals (the pundits and some of the more sensible of the rest bore testimony to and deplored their national deficiency in morals), grammar, writing in English as well as Bengali, astronomy, mathematics; and in time as the fund increases, English belles-lettres, poetry, etc.'. 'No other institution,' to quote R.C. Majumdar, 'exerted even a small fraction of the influence that this college wielded in bringing about the new awakening of Bengal in the 19th century.' Both Raja Rammohan Roy and David Hare were associated with the founding of the college, although they formally kept themselves away from it so as not to antagonize orthodox Hindu sections of the population. After four decades of many-splendoured existence, the college was renamed Presidency College in 1855. It was destined to play a catalyst's role in Bengal's awakening for nearly a century thereafter.

The government's education policy oscillated for a long time between the two extremes of encouraging the traditional system of education on one hand, and introducing the Western system of education on the other. A number of Englishmen who served in India became conscious of India's ancient history and civilization, and felt that nothing should be done to uproot the people from their own history and traditions. The setting up of the Calcutta Madarasa by Warren Hastings in 1871 and the Sanskrit College at Benares by Duncan, the resident, were examples of this trend of thought. The Charter Act of 1833 formally permitted the entry of Christian missionaries and also provided a grant of rupees one lakh annually for the advancement of Western knowledge in India. Many British officials influenced by Bentham's utilitarianism wanted Western education to be introduced in India for the 'upliftment' of the people. Bentham's disciple, Mill, was at that time a high functionary of the East India Company's head office in London; and under his influence the Court of Directors issued an order on 18 February 1824 in support of the policy of education based on Western sciences and arts instead of the traditional system based on Hindu

or Muslim scriptures. This policy received a fillip with the coming of Lord Bentinck, 'an admirer of Bentham and Mill', as Governor General in 1828. In the controversy raging in Calcutta at that time between those who pleaded for Western-style education on one hand, like Macaulay supported by Raja Rammohan Roy, and Indian scholars and the so-called orientalists who emphasized the need to continue educating Indians in their traditional lines on the other, like H.H. Wilson, Bentinck gave his decisive support to the Anglicists. On 7 March 1835, by a government resolution, he gave the official seal of approval to Macaulay's policy and directed that government-aided institutions would thereafter only support the teaching of European arts and sciences through the medium of English, and that all government funds earmarked for the spread of education would only be spent in this way. The resolution stated that 'the great object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and sciences among the natives of India and that all the funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone'. This helped the Company in hiring clerks, scribes and petty officials, who knew how to read and write English, to run the empire, which was one of Macaulay's intentions. Bentinck's crucial decision also paved the way for the renaissance that swept Bengal during the next half-century. In this context, the next important landmark was the Education Dispatch of Sir Charles Wood, Secretary of State, in July 1854, which led to the founding of the universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1858, and also the founding of many vernacular mission schools. The University of Calcutta along with the Presidency College (formerly known as Hindu College) were to become major catalysts in the process of Bengal's transformation. The Calcutta Medical College and the Bengal Engineering College were pioneering institutions in initiating Bengalees to the study of modern medicine and engineering. By the time of the mutiny, mass indigenization of the lower and middle ranks of the administration and the judiciary had already been achieved. This coincided with the replacement of Persian by English as the official government language.

Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education* dated 2 February 1835 is a very important document in connection with these changes. In it, Macaulay ridiculed India's ancient heritage, but also envisaged as a long-term possibility that Western education would lead the Indian people to independence. 'Come what may, self-knowledge will lead to self-rule, and that would be the proudest day in British history,' said Macaulay, almost prophetically.

GROWTH OF THE PRESS

An essential aspect of the Bengal Renaissance was the growth of an independent press—both newspapers and periodicals—in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The beginnings of the press in India can be traced to an eccentric Englishman by the name of James Augustus Hickey, who in 1780 founded the *Bengal Gazette*, a fiercely independent journal which exposed the scandals of British colonial rule and its repression.

The Bengali periodicals, along with the dailies, also played an important role in building up an organized public opinion and serving as vehicles for anti-government feelings in the nineteenth century. Starting with the *Bengal Gazette* (1818), edited and published by Gangakishore Bhattacharji, and *Samachar Darpan*, which was published in the same year, Bengali periodicals grew from strength to strength. Other important periodicals were Rammohan's *Sambad Kaumudi* (1831), Bhabanicharan Banerjee's *Samachar Chandrika*, Ishwar Chandra Gupta's *Sambad Prabhakar* (1830), the *Tatvabodhini Patrika* (1843), Rajendra Mitra's historical and encyclopedic monthly, the *Bibidhartha Samgraha* (1851), Bankim Chandra's *Bangadarshan* (1872), subsequently revived by Rabindranath, *Bharati* (1877), *Sadhana* (1891) brought out by the Tagore family of Jorasanko and the education gazette *Saptahik Bartabaha* (1856–68), of which the poet Rangalal Banerjee and Pyaricharan Sarkar were editors. All of them contributed enormously to the growth of a freethinking press.

There were also two Bengali fortnightlies run by Muslims, *Mihir* and *Sudhakar*. They were soon merged into a weekly, *Mihir o Sudhakar*. It supported the partition and had a circulation of 10,000 copies per week.

There were several other journals owned and published by Muslims. Of them, the fortnightly *Ahmadi* (1886), published from Tangail and edited by Maulavi Abdul Hamid Khan Yusufzai, stood for Hindu–Muslim unity on all common issues.

Significantly, many of the journals were published from *mofussil* towns indicating the gradual spread of modernity in the outlying areas of Bengal and the growth of public opinion. According to a list of journals compiled in 1873 at the suggestion of Lieutenant Governor Campbell, there were thirty-five journals published in Bengal (thirty-three in Bengali), of them nineteen being published from Calcutta and sixteen from mofussil districts. Slowly but surely, the Bengal press was becoming stridently national and anti-moderates.

ISOLATED RIPPLES AMONG THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

As already noted, this great intellectual movement influenced only a fringe of the Muslim community. At the beginning of the British rule, the Muslims were a sullen community withdrawing themselves in general from Western influence. They did not take part in the process of modern education that started in the 1830s, nor in the process of social reconstruction that followed. They still lamented their loss of political power with the advent of the foreign rule in the country which they had ruled for centuries. The British rulers, on their part, looked upon the Muslims with a great deal of suspicion and tended to keep as far away from them as possible. They encouraged the Hindus, whom they found to be loyal subjects and eager to learn English and adopt modernity. The Muslim subjects were generally viewed as seditious and untrustworthy. The Hindus adopted Western education in large numbers, got the lion's share of government jobs and the opportunities of career and professions that British rule offered. This created a counter-tendency among the Muslims to keep themselves away from foreign rule, its value system and the modernity of the nineteenth century. In between, there took place the great revolt of 1857 in which Muslims all over north India took part with a great deal of enthusiasm, clearly aiming at the revival of the Mughal Empire. This further aggravated

the great divide between the Muslims in general on one hand and the British rulers and anglicized Hindus on the other.

A significant change took place around 1870 with the coming out of an epoch-making book, *Indian Musalmans*, by W.W. Hunter. This study graphically described how British rule had distanced itself from the Muslim community, gone overboard in courting the Hindus, how the Hindus were gradually becoming seditious and clamouring for more and more reform, and how, in the changed context, the interest of the British rule lay in courting the Muslims and turning them into loyal subjects of the British Empire. From this started a new policy of the British rulers, gradually turning away from dependence on the Hindus and turning to the Muslims to provide a support base to colonial rule. This was to turn into a massive process of *divide et impera* (divide and rule) in the twentieth century, leading the Muslim separatist politics away from the national freedom movement. Paradoxically, the partition of Bengal in 1905 encouraged both the general freedom movement and a separatist movement among the Bengalee Muslims. The community remained, by and large, aloof from the British rule and the modernizing influence it had brought like the English language and education. But there were some Muslim intellectuals and social activists of this period, who genuinely wanted to change their community. The pioneer was a maverick Abdul Raheem (1785–1853), also called *dahri* (atheist), originally from north India, who came to Calcutta in quest of knowledge and learnt not only English but also modern science and logic. He became a freethinker and eventually became an atheist. After serving as tutor to Tipu Sultan's grandchildren in Tollygunge, he settled down at Tiljala where he lived in a tent and attracted a number of thinking intellectuals all around. The story goes that he avoided meeting Syed Ahmed who, on a visit to Calcutta, wanted to meet him. His disciple Maulana Obaidullah el Obaide (1834–85), who carried on this tradition of freethinking, was a friend of Raj Narain Bose, a leader of the Brahmo Samaj. Yet another Muslim leader in this tradition was Delawar Hussain Ahmed (1840–1913), the first Muslim graduate of India who passed from the Presidency College, Calcutta, in first division in 1861. He maintained

that the needs of the changing society could not be met by conservative religious laws of Islam and supported the efforts of Syed Amir Ali. The better known stalwarts among the Muslims were Nawab Abdul Latif (1828–93) and Syed Amir Ali (1849–1928), both of them wanting change in Muslim society, but the former wanting this change to come about through the institutions of madrasa and the latter wanting to bring about the change through English-oriented educational institutions. Amir Ali, barrister and honorary magistrate, maintained that the Quran should be read without the interpretation put upon it by the ulemas, who represented the unauthorized teachings of their ancient predecessors, and still lived in the ninth century. Delawar Hussain Ahmed, who has been described as 'truly a renaissance personality', believed the decline of the Muslims was due to their religious conservatism, absence of tolerance and the union of religion with the state. He also exhorted the Muslims to learn the Bengali language and strongly recommended that the Muslims of Bengal must adopt Bengali as their vernacular, to the exclusion of Urdu, which did not suit their requirements. As the majority of the Muslims were still away from English education, and as Delawar Hussain wrote exclusively in English, his ideas failed to reach the common people of his generation. They, therefore, remained very much outside these secular and modern thoughts and remained under total domination of backward and conservative mullahs. His following observation is refreshing: 'We may multiply academies for Mohamadans. We may make them collectors, magistrates or judges, but we shall never enable them to advance as a body in social importance if the Mohamadans of India continued deliberately to ignore the real causes of their dissidences or obstinately refused changes in their laws and institutions.' But he did anticipate the liberal and progressive sections in Bangladesh during the twentieth century fighting for Bengali and for independence against Pakistani colonial rule.[2] Among the other stalwarts who can be mentioned are Haji Mohammad Mohsin, who set up the Hooghly College primarily for educating Muslim students, Faqir Lalan Shah who lived around the Padma River in the nineteenth century and whose devotional songs still stir hearts of both Hindus and Muslims,

Mosharraf Hussain, the author of the classic *Bishad Sindhu*, and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) who spent her entire life for the cause of education of Muslim girls and built the Sakhawat Memorial Girls School, a well-known educational institution of Calcutta. She firmly believed that Muslim women must be educated and made socially conscious if the community had to be uplifted. Rokeya fervently opposed the unequal and cruel treatment of Muslim women by the male-dominated Muslim society and pleaded for the removal of all civil laws and social institutions created in the name of religion and designed to treat women as slaves. She was critical of the purdah system and the women's excessive love for ornaments which were badges of slavery. She wrote extensively, advocating female education and economic independence of women and quoted from the Prophet of Islam to justify equality for women. Typical of her views is the following comment from her book *Motichoor*:

> We shall do whatever is needed to be done to attain equality with men. If earning our livelihood independently ensures our freedom, we shall do that. If necessary, we shall be lady-clerk, lady-magistrate, lady-barrister, lady-judge—everything … If we cannot get employment in the offices of the government, we will take to agriculture; why do you cry for not being able to find bridegrooms for your daughters? Give proper education to your daughters and let them earn their own livelihood.[3]

Unfortunately, she remained a lonely star in the horizon, whose ideas were given importance only when Bangladesh became independent. The efforts of these stalwarts failed to move the bulk of the ordinary Muslims and remained confined only to the microscopic upper classes. People down below continued to be in their narrow grooves and fell victim to separatist politics in the twentieth century.

The Muslim masses were not exposed either to Western education or to modernity as such, and remained on the whole steeped in medieval outlook and attitudes towards life. It was only during the early years of the twentieth century that, following general spread of Western education among them, large masses of Muslims were emancipated from the medieval mould of thought and belief, developed some kind of modern outlook and were, to that extent, drawn towards the great movement that had started among the

Hindus in the early nineteenth century. They also started taking pride in Bengali language and Bengali culture in a broad sense. Typical of the trend were poets Jasimuddin, Golam Mustafa and Sufia Kamal, intellectuals like Humayun Kabir, Wajed Ali and Qazi Abdul Wadud and the poet Nazrul Islam. But the mass of the community of Bengalee Muslims had to wait till the 1950s and 1960s when, following the creation of Pakistan and their inability to find a common identity with the West Pakistanis, they were driven increasingly to vigorous espousal of the Bengali image, eventually leading to their revolt against Pakistan.