CLASS, CASTE AND POLITICS
IN CALCUTTA, 1815 – 38

I

Some years ago Professor Morris-Jones suggested that contemporary Indian politics should be looked upon as a tale of three political idioms, ‘modern’, ‘traditional’ and ‘saintly’.¹ In this paper I shall attempt to show that, in Calcutta in the 1820s and 1830s, the politics of the Bengali elites of the bhadralok class, was conducted in two idioms, which I shall also call ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’. The term politics is used here to mean collective human action performed with a power perspective. In politics men aim at gaining authority and influence over certain areas of human activity. This concept of politics does not preclude the role of ideas; many men were inspired, stirred into action by some great ideas, but they all aimed at gaining power, if only to implement their ideas. In the nineteenth century the political destiny of Bengal was controlled by the British, and no section of the population (with the exception of a small segment of the Bengali Muslim peasantry led by the revivalist Faraidis)² was willing or able to challenge the British authority, least of all the Calcutta elite. There were, however, many less important areas of power which were controlled by the Indians and the elite groups competed to gain this control.

By the ‘modern’ idioms of politics I mean agitation through the press, public meetings, and petitions to settle public issues. The public issues that were important to the Indians were concerned with English education, sati, the right of the Indians to sit as jurors, the defence of private property, and the demand for

* This paper was read at a seminar in Cambridge in 1968 and was published in E. R. Leach & S. N. Mukherjee, (ed.) Elites in South Asia, Cambridge, 1970. I am grateful to Dorothy Mukherjee for typing the first draft.


a better position, for Indians in the British India administration. The two main groups involved in agitation on such public issues were described as ‘liberals’ and ‘tories’ in a contemporary magazine.\(^1\) Although this view has been accepted by some modern historians\(^2\) I shall endeavour to show that such political labels had only a limited application in the 1820s and 1830s of the last century in Calcutta.

There was another area of collective activity, almost hidden, in which the Calcutta elite were engaged. This activity was beyond the control and knowledge of the British administrators. In this area caste rules were important, particularly those rules concerning marriage, pollution and inheritance. It seems that in the eighteenth century all matters related to caste were settled through ‘caste cutcherries’,\(^3\) and leading men in Calcutta like Madan Datta and Nubkissen competed with each other to gain control of such ‘cutcherries’.\(^4\) In the nineteenth century the ‘cutcherries’ were replaced by dals (de facto social factions). The dalapatis (leading members of the dals) tried to control men by using the instruments of social sanction of excommunication, through the dals. I shall call such activities politics conducted through a traditional idiom, since they involved competition among elite groups in order to gain control over men and matters. This fits Morris-Jones’s definition of the ‘traditional’ language of politics, it is the language ‘of a particular kind of highly developed status society’ and it is acted upon more than it is spoken about.\(^5\)

During the first three decades of the nineteenth century no other Indian elite group was so active in public affairs and in such numbers as the elites of the bhadralok class in Calcutta; even Bombay was a decade or two behind Calcutta in this res-

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3. H. Verelst, View of the Rise, progress and present state of the government in Bengal, including a reply to the misrepresentation of Mr. Bolts and other writers. London, 1772, pp. 27–8.
4. For the rivalry between the two families, see N. N. Ghosh. Memoirs of Maharaja Nubkissen Bahadur, Calcutta, 1901, pp. 141–9.
pect. In 1815 Rammohun Roy established his *Atmiya Sabha*, the first organization of its kind, which deliberately set out to reform Hindu religion and society; the members discussed both the nature of God and his various attributes and debated on social problems concerning caste, pollution and *sati*. In 1817 many well-to-do Bengalis, some of whom were very orthodox, joined with some non-official Europeans to establish the Hindu College, which had a far-reaching effect on the social history of Calcutta and Bengal. This was to be followed by the foundation of the School Book Society and the School Society which played a prominent part in improving primary education in Calcutta if not in Bengal. They printed new textbooks, opened new types of schools which held annual examinations, laying the foundations for a new educational system. The emphasis was on English, mathematics, geography, natural sciences and English history, at both the primary and the higher level. Many schools and higher educational seminaries, like the Bishops' College, Rammohun's Anglo-Hindu School, the Oriental Seminary, the Sanskrit College and, most important, the Calcutta Medical College, were established during this period. An Indian press both in English and in vernacular languages was established in 1818; by the end of a decade it had refined itself into an effective political weapon, maintaining a small but steady circulation and providing a livelihood for a fairly large number of journalists and printers. Pamphlet wars were waged between rival groups, agitating for and against the abolition of *sati* or debating on the Bengali's right to alienate property without the family consent. Calcutta Town Hall witnessed many spectacular public meetings, often attended by up to 1,000 men, where European free traders joined with the Indians to protest against such issues as the restrictions on a free press, and administrative reforms.

Rammohun's *Atmiya Sabha* was to be used as a model by his supporters and his opponents. Many *sabhās* and *samitis* (societies) were formed during this period to further the cause of social and religious reform, for literary discussions and above all for political agitation. Although a large number of such societies were founded by the young students of the Hindu College, more serious ones were organized by their elders. One such organization was the *Dharma Sabha*, which was formed in 1830
in the wake of a great agitation against the abolition of sati. Lord Bentinck inadvertently gave the Bengalis a chance to learn the techniques of agitation which were to be used later for more worthy causes. Finally, in 1838 the European free traders, Indian zamindars, Hindus and Muslims, conservatives and reformers united to defend the landed property in Bengal. The orthodox members now had the opportunity to put their experience in the Dharma Sabha to better use. This interest in public affairs, unusual by Indian standards in the early nineteenth century, sprang from a social transformation brought about by a number of factors, chiefly the economic changes in the eighteenth century. The society was being transformed from a status and relatively closed society where social and political relationships were determined by caste and customs, to a relatively open and competitive society where social relationships were largely shaped by class. However, caste remained important—social prestige was still attached to it and inheritance laws were determined by caste.

Indian politics in Calcutta during this period, 1815–38, were shaped by both class and caste, and, since rural Bengal left its mark on Calcutta despite rapid urbanization, the ‘traditional’ language of politics was as important as the ‘modern’ language of politics.

II

In the late-eighteenth and the early-nineteenth centuries Calcutta, like Forster’s Chandrapore, was divided into two worlds, southern or European and northern or native. The vast differences between the European town and the ‘black town’, as the Indian quarter was called, struck many European observers. The European town was, as Sir William Jones said, ‘large, airy and commodious’, the houses were ‘in general well built and some of them equal to palaces’. The ‘black town’ in contrast was overcrowded with men living in badly built, unimpressive houses; with few exceptions even the houses of the opulent Indians were not built to please the eye.

At the apex of the social and political pyramid were the Europeans of the southern part of the city. Although the worlds were not yet as segregated as they were in Forster’s Chandrapore, European contact with the Indians was more official and less social. The aloofness of the Europeans was scoffed at in the eighteenth century by the famous Indo-Muslim historian, Ghulam Hussain, and Rammohun Roy, the social reformer, was aware of it. However, the Europeans were not a homogeneous body; many non-official free traders, journalists, businessmen, and missionaries, men like David Hare, James Silk Buckingham and William Adam, had a greater contact with upper classes of Indian society. Indians on their part were eager to establish such contacts and many ventures in education, journalism, religious reform and business, were jointly started by the Indians and the non-official Europeans.

The vital statistics of Calcutta have never been very reliable. Even the census of 1872 could not be accepted as accurate. Thus it is not possible to make a satisfactory numerical study of the process of urbanization. We have no reliable set of figures from which we could measure the rate of population growth of Calcutta, the rate of literacy, the change in age groups, occupational patterns, sex ratio, and the religious composition of the population. But, ever since 1752 when Holwell first put out his figures, many attempts had been made to enumerate and classify the population of Calcutta. Earlier estimates gave very high figures for the Indian population of Calcutta. However, we have more reliable statistics for Calcutta from about 1821. It was then reported that there were 179,917 people living in Calcutta, of whom 118,203 were Hindus, 48,162 Muslims,

4 The following estimates were made by various people in the nineteenth century. 1801: 1,625,000; 1802: 600,000; 1810: 10,000; 1819: 750,000. See William Adam, *Reports on the state of education in Bengal* (1835 and 1838) (ed. A. N. Basu), Calcutta, 1941, p. 5.
13,138 Christians and 414 Chinese. This figure was much lower than the one given by Dwarkanath Tagore to R. Montgomery Martin and the figure supplied by the magistrates. But, when we compare these figures with the estimates made in 1837 by W. Birch, the Superintendent of Police in Calcutta, on the basis of the reports made by the assessors of the house tax, it seems that the assessors in 1821 were not very far out.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Western Hindus</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Euro-Asians</td>
<td>3,138</td>
<td>17,333</td>
<td>20,471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>4,746</td>
<td>120,318</td>
<td>125,064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>3,181</td>
<td>527</td>
<td>3,708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinamen</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenians</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>683</td>
<td>1,319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Muslims</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengali Muslims</td>
<td>13,677</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>13,726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45,067</td>
<td>19,054</td>
<td>64,121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two interesting facts emerge from these figures. Between 1821 and 1837, the population of the city of Calcutta grew very rapidly, by nearly 50,000. Although the rate of population growth was marginal by twentieth-century standards, the figures do indicate that Calcutta was a growing and thriving city, where

1 Census of India 1961; Report of the population estimates of India (1820–1830) (ed. D. Bhattacharya and B. B. Bhattacharya). New Delhi, 1963, pp. 234–5. It was estimated that another 100,000 entered Calcutta daily, excluding the handful who travelled to and from the city by carriages and horses. The number was reached by the estimate of the houses in Calcutta and checking the people at each important entrance to the city. As far as we know these figures have never been cross-checked with the consumption of salt and other methods used by James Prinsep in Benaras.

2 Tagore’s informers suggested that there were 53,005 houses, in which some 300,000 people lived. See R. Montgomery Martin. Statistics of the Colonies of the British Empire in the West Indies, South America, North America, Asia, Australia, Africa and Europe. From the official records of the Colonial Office, London, 1839, p. 209. For the figures for the years 1822 and 1828 see Census of India 1961, pp. 234–5, P. P. H. C. 1831, V. 320A. Appendix no. 42,762; and A. F. S. Ahmed, Social ideas and social change in Bengal 1818–1835, p. 11.

3 C. Finch, ‘Vital statistics of Calcutta’, p. 172. Please note that the total number given here excluded the people who entered the city daily and also those who lived in the suburbs of Calcutta.
many men came looking for jobs. This fact is partially confirmed by the imperfect set of figures that we now have on sex ratios and age groups. As far as can be ascertained, the majority of people in Calcutta were male and adult. According to one estimate there were 61.6 Hindu women to 100 Hindu men and a corresponding figure for Muslim women was 50.8. Calcutta also had fewer children than an average European city. The process continued in the latter part of the nineteenth century. If increasing male immigration is a sign of urbanization then the process started very early in Calcutta.

Another interesting fact emerges from these figures. Although Calcutta always had a heterogeneous population consisting of many communities from the very beginning, the bulk of the population were Bengali Hindus. Bengali Muslims formed the second largest community in Calcutta. According to figures given for 1798, the Muslim population in Calcutta increased at a faster rate than the Hindu population between 1798 and 1837. This is confirmed by the fact that owing to lack of protein in the diet and ritual bathing in the Ganges the mortality rate was higher among Hindus than among Muslims. But this slightly higher rate of increase among Muslims did not change the social structure of Calcutta. The ‘black town’ remained predominantly a Bengali Hindu city. The total Bengali Muslim population was still less than half the total Bengali Hindu population.

What is more significant, however, is the fact that the upper and middle part of the social and economic pyramid of Indian society in Calcutta was dominated by Hindus. Only a small

1 C Finch, loc. cit. p. 173.
2 It was estimated in 1866 that the majority of the population belonged to the age group of 16–40. In 1872 Hunter suggested that 67 per cent of the population were male adults. Report on the Census of Calcutta 1866, Calcutta, 1866. pp. 15–16. Cf. W.W. Hunter, A statistical account of Bengal, Vol. 1, pp. 38–44.
4 Abstracting from Police magistrate’s reports, Hamilton suggested that there were. in Calcutta, in 1798, some 14,700 Muslims and some 56,460 Hindus. W. Hamilton, The East India Gazetteer, London, 1815, p. 137.
number of Muslims took an interest in public affairs and had some weight in society, either because they were rich merchants and landowners, or because they were vakils in the Sadr Dewani Adalat or teachers at the Calcutta Madrasa or Fort William College. Some of these men, like Maulavi Karim Hjussain, played an active and useful role in the committees of the Calcutta School Book Society and Calcutta School Society. But the majority of leading Muslims were non-Bengalis. It is interesting to note that some of the Muslim members of the School Book Society were eager to promote the interest of ‘Hindostani’ in both Persian and Nagari scripts and of a school situated in an area dominated by the non-Bengali Muslim community.¹ This fact needs some explanation. Ever since 1870 when W. W. Hunter published his famous work on The Indian Musalmans,² there had been a widely accepted thesis about the so-called ‘Muslim backwardness’ in Bengal and in India. It is generally thought that the Muslims were dispossessed when the British took over the administration of the province. The successive administrative reforms took away the remaining privileges held by the Muslims, consequently the community remained hostile towards British rule, and their rather conservative religion strengthened their dislike of western rule, western education and western culture. So, we are told, the Muslim response being totally negative, they failed to produce a leadership willing to inaugurate English education and social reform among the Muslims. Some scholars have even cited the Muslim peasant revolts as examples of this kind of Muslim response.³

The administrative reforms started by Warren Hastings and consolidated by Cornwallis dispossessed many powerful men in Bengal. But under the Mughal rule, in the suba of Bengal, Muslims never had a monopoly in all branches of administration. Undoubtedly they held the highest executive positions in government and controlled the army and the administration of criminal justice (nizamet). But the Hindus were not a deprived class.

¹ W. Adam, Reports on the state of education in Bengal, pp. 12–13.
They monopolized the administration of the revenue (dewani). A reading of Sair Mutaqharin shows that a considerable number were employed as foujdar and as generals in the army. Some of the most reliable men in the Nawab’s army were Hindus. In 1844, when the Bengali bhadralok were pleading earnestly for a better share in the administration of British India, through their Bengal British India society, they drew up an impressive list of Hindus employed in high positions during Mughal rule.

The administrative reforms, which culminated in the Cornwallis system, swept away established native agencies such as ameens, quanungoes, roy royans, etc. Undoubtedly, in some branches of administration the Muslims were more adversely affected than the Hindus. Thus the establishment of the Company’s army, with Hindu sepoys, meant unemployment among the Muslim soldiers. The reforms introduced by Cornwallis in the administration of justice reduced the number of Muslim vakils (agents or law officers). In the eighteenth century the majority of the vakils were Muslims, but after the introduction of the Cornwallis system only 25 per cent were Muslims. Muslim ‘nobility’, associated with the Court, lost all power and prestige when Murshidabad was reduced to a district headquarters. Their rather emotional letters, which have survived in the records, pleaded with successive governor generals for small monthly pensions, often as little as Rs. 40, to maintain their large families and servants who stayed behind even after their fall from power.

The Hindus were also adversely affected by the administrative reforms, the great roy royans, naib dewans, foujdar; men

2 The Bengal British India Society, Evidences relative to the efficiency of native agency in the administration of the affairs of this country. Calcutta. 1844, p, ix. Robert Orme wrote that Aly Verdy Khan ‘preferred the service of gentoos in every office and dignity of the state excepting in the ranks of the army’. R. Orme, Vol. 11. p 53.
1 Ghulam Hussain, Sair Mutaqharin.
like Alumchand, Manickchand and Mohanlal, who managed the affairs of the state under the patronage of the Nawabs, vanished from the scene. Rammohan Roy describes this loss of political consequence\(^1\) for the Hindus under the British rule.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Europeans</th>
<th>Natives</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>7,719</td>
<td>49,322</td>
<td>57,041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810</td>
<td>10,715</td>
<td>77,125</td>
<td>87,840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>11,676</td>
<td>121,238</td>
<td>132,914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>15,701</td>
<td>96,897</td>
<td>112,598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>16,393</td>
<td>102,055</td>
<td>118,358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>26,803</td>
<td>126,910</td>
<td>153,713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>27,159</td>
<td>138,142</td>
<td>165,301</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The administrative reforms and the economic changes brought about by new land laws and trade opened up opportunities for men who came from a stratum of traditional society which consisted largely of Hindus. The available statistics show that a large number of Indians were employed by the East India Company’s government, the majority in the Revenue and Judicial Departments. Table 2 gives the figures for Indians and Europeans employed in Bengal in the civil administration from 1800 to 1851. It is important to remember that the Indo-Britons (Anglo-Indians) are not classified separately from the Europeans.

Although the number of Indians employed dropped in 1830 from 121,238 to 96,897, the Indians in the Company’s service outnumbered the Europeans by about 5 to 1. However this was an army of petty clerks. The handful of Indians who were employed in more responsible posts were also in the Revenue and Judicial Departments. Figures now available for 1851 show that, of 2,910 Indians employed as unconvanent servants, 2,762 were in Revenue and Judicial Department.\(^8\) Before 1828 there were only two grades of native judges, the *Sudder Ameens* and *Munsiffs*. In 1833 the office of Deputy Collector was created for the Indians. in 1837 that of *Principal Sudder* and in 1843 that of


Deputy Magistrate. However Indians still received miserable salaries. In 1827 no Indian employed in the Judicial or Revenue Department received more than Rs. 250 per month or £300 a year. The figures given in Table 3 show that out of 2,813 Indians employed in 1849 as unconstituted servants only 493 received salaries above the £240 grade, while 2,320 were below that grade.

Table 3.¹ *Allowances received by Indians in 1849*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Received by</th>
<th>£ (per annum)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>840 – 960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>720 – 840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>600 – 720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>480 – 600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>360 – 480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>277</td>
<td>240 – 360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,173</td>
<td>120 – 240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,147</td>
<td>24 – 120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,813</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is clear from these figures that the British administration replaced the Indians, Hindus and Muslims, in all responsible, high-salaried posts and created an administrative machinery which required a large army of clerks and junior administrators in some departments, especially in the Revenue and Judicial Departments. The education and the skill that was required was readily provided by the Hindus. The Muslim population in Bengal consisted largely of officers or 'nobility' (for want of a better term), who were almost invariably non-Bengali, and the Bengali peasantry. Neither of these two classes were interested or had skills for the jobs offered by the Company's government. There was undoubtedly a middle group which consisted of teachers, petty government officers, *vakils* and men in similar professions. This was never very large, not as large as the Hindus in a similar position (with the exception of *vakils*) and played a marginal role in the social and political history of Bengal, unless they happened to be *vakils* at the *Sadr Dewani Adalat* like Maulavi Aminullah.

The statistics of the traditional educational system, imperfect as they are, confirm the view that the majority of the middle group were Hindus. In the province of Bengal (which included

Bihar) the proportion of the Hindu population to the Muslim population was two or less than three to one. But the proportion of the educated Hindus to the educated Muslims was eighteen to one. What is more significant the *kayasthas* dominated the schools where Persian was taught;¹ Muslim scholars formed a minority in these schools. William Adam noticed that there was no account or record of any private institutions for Mahomedan learning either in Calcutta or in the surrounding districts.⁸ According to Ward, in 1818 in Calcutta there were twenty-eight Hindu schools where 173 students received a free education. No rich Muslim community in Calcutta was willing to patronize traditional education nor was there a class eager to receive such education. The traditional educational system had a practical side; it taught, both at the elementary schools and at the higher centres of learning, rudimentary arithmetic, Persian, book-keeping and the Shastric or Koran law, essential for trade, commerce, managing *zamindaris*, and for the junior posts in the administration. Neither the "nobility" nor the peasantry had any interest in these professions. The British administrative reforms had helped to create a Hindu middle-income group.

III

It is not certain how many clerks and junior administrators lived in Calcutta, but it is reasonable to assume that since Calcutta was the centre of British-Indian administration in Bengal a large number of the clerks and some of the junior administrators settled in the city, although a large number of the Indian unconventional servants appointed by the Revenue and Judicial Department would necessarily be stationed outside.

The coming of the British had also opened up new opportunities in many fields other than administration, not least in trade, commerce and in the ownership and management of land. Here too the Bengali Hindus had an advantage over the Muslims. Their role as brokers, financiers and agents was vital to the British-Indian economy. This was not so much because the

Hindus had controlled the economy of the country during the Mughal rule; it has been estimated that nine-tenths of the total land was under their control. All large zamindars who paid over 50 per cent of the total land revenue in Bengal were Hindus, and almost all the bankers were also Hindu.¹ The bankers and zamindars have also been described as the ‘junior anti-feudal ally of the British’.² But they were not the real gainers; the Jagat Setts, the Maharaja of Krishnagar and others who helped the British in 1757 either vanished from the scene or were reduced to insignificance before the end of the eighteenth century. If the British rule brought misery to the Muslim ‘nobility’ and the high-ranking Hindu officers, the misery was shared by the old zamindars and the old bankers.³ The men who gained most in the New World were small traders, brokers and junior administrators, pykars, dallas, gomasthas, munshis, banyans, and dewans.

From the very beginning it was essential for the Company to have interpreters, brokers and other native agencies to conduct business with Indian producers. The brokers, like the Setts and Basaks, who were weavers by caste and whose traditional occupation was trade in cotton piece-goods, flourished in Calcutta under the Company’s rule. The Setts controlled the broker’s office in Calcutta until the end of the dadni system in 1753. By the beginning of the nineteenth century they had become shroffs (money-lenders) in Calcutta⁴. Their descendants helped the cause of the modernists in the 1820s and 1830s by establishing English schools, opening ‘reading rooms’ in their large houses for the ‘educated youths of the metropolis’ and acting as ‘justices of peace’ in the City. They also supplied the holy water for

the idols of Somnath and Dwarkanath and established their family idol Radhakanta Jew in Calcutta.¹

In the eighteenth century the British administration in Bengal, more particularly in Calcutta, was so organized that it had to depend on Indian junior administrators who worked more like speculators or contractors than as civil servants. The contractors-cum-administrators had a better chance of becoming prosperous in the revenue and commercial departments. Akrur Datta, a sloop contractor, Govinda Mitra ‘the black collector’ of Calcutta, Baranasi Ghosh, dewan of the Sheriff of Calcutta, Hidaram Banerjee, ameen to the Sheriff of Calcutta, amassed fortunes in this manner. Moreover, the system of ‘farming out’ (meaning letting out of a fluctuating source of revenue income for a more or less stable annual sum to the highest bidder) which was first used in Calcutta for collecting rents and duties, and later used extensively throughout the whole province, especially during the period between 1772 and 1777, created an unprecedented instability in the economy but allowed a large-scale circulation of money and gave new groups, banyans and gomasthas, the opportunity to control land and land-rent, thus replacing the ‘ancient families’. Significantly, the ‘new landed aristocracy’ came into existence in areas where the British used their method of farming out first in Calcutta, The Twenty Four Parganas and Burdwan.²

However, it was in the private sector of the English trade in Asia that the Indian middlemen flourished. In the eighteenth century the trade between Asia and England was so organized that co-operation between the Company and various forms of private enterprise was essential for its development. While the Company clung to its monopoly of trade between Asia and Europe, it allowed private Englishmen, ‘free merchants’ and company servants to enjoy a large share in ‘the Country Trade’, trade in the Indian Ocean between Asian countries. The Indian financiers played a vital role in the private sector; they provided the capital which could not be raised in the absence of a modern

joint stock banking system. The Indians also invested large sums in Calcutta, where there was a boom in building, especially during the 1760s and 1770s. Recently, Marshall has pointed out that case after case argued before the Calcutta Mayor's Court shows 'that Europeans traded on the capital of their banyans or Indian agents; or to be more exact the banyans traded on their masters' names and authority'.¹ Men like Nubkissen, Madan Datta, Dattaram Ghose, and later Rambodolal Dey, invested money in this manner and amassed vast fortunes. Lack of capital, lack of knowledge of local products and restrictions imposed on the free application of European skill and capital especially in the mofussil areas made it necessary to work through the Indian agencies. It appears that the Indian commercial class did very well from trade. As early as 1802 their significance was noted by an English observer. 'The formerly timid Hindu now lends money at respondentia in distant voyages, engages in speculations to various parts of the world and works as an underwriter in the different insurance offices, erects indigo works in various parts of Bengal and is just as well acquainted with the principles of British laws respecting commerce as the generality of European merchants.'²

This commercial class had also invested large sums in land. The transfer of land from the 'ancient families' to the new groups continued throughout the eighteenth century, even after the Permanent Settlement. Darpanarayan Tagore, who acquired a large fortune working as a dewan of the French Company in Chandernagore, settled in Calcutta some time during the latter half of the eighteenth century and purchased a big zamindari in north Bengal which originally belonged to the 'ancient family' of Rajsahi.³ After the Permanent Settlement the security of investment attracted Calcutta Hindu merchants like Dwarkanath Tagore and Motilal Seal to land. A large number of estates changed hands during the years immediately following the

Permanent Settlement, when the government confiscated many zamindaris for revenue arrears and put them up to auction.¹

There is evidence to show that a large number of Indians, rich and poor, moved into Calcutta during the period between 1742 and 1756.² But the vast majority of the Indians settled down in Calcutta during the 1860s and 1870s, when Calcutta was being transformed from a small European settlement into a prosperous commercial city. The opulent merchants and bankers were the first group of Indians to settle down in the city. They built large houses, established family deities, patronized Brahmins and ghataks (match-makers), entertained European officers and friends as a Mughal courtier would do, imitated the Europeans in architecture, furniture and, in the nineteenth century, in the consumption of tea, wine and soda water.³ These were the Bengali abhijat (aristocratic) families. Debs, Tagores, Deys, Ghoses, Mallicks, whose descendants claimed leadership in Calcutta society during the nineteenth century. They were the first urbanized social group in Bengal, who transformed their Calcutta basas (temporary residences) into baris (permanent homes) in the eighteenth century, long before any other social group.⁴

Table 4 gives us a list of leading men in Calcutta, who were

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² Raja Binaya Krishna Deb, The early history and growth of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1905, p. 60

³ W. Hamilton, The East India Gazetteer (2nd ed.), London, 1828 Vol. 1, p. 324, as quoted in A. F. S. Ahmed, Social ideas and social change in Bengal 1818–1835, p. 13. European clothes became fashionable among the young undergraduates in the forties. Ralph Smyth, Bengal Artillery Revenue Surveyor, observed in 1851, ‘a late introduction of pantaloons, stockings and patent leather shoes, in an attempt to Europeanize themselves, is to be seen amongst the young Bengalis in Calcutta, but it is unsuited to them, their own peculiar costume always obtains respect, which the innovation seldom does.’ R. Smyth, Statistical and geographical report of the 24 Pergunnahs district, Calcutta, 1851, p. 17.

⁴ This process of urbanization was slow to start among other classes, who even in the twentieth century used their Calcutta residences (basas) as temporary living quarters, while their real homes (baris) were in the villages where all the important family functions like sradhs, marriages and pujas took place. See P. Sinha, Nineteenth century Bengal: Aspects of social history, Calcutta, 1965, pp. 124–7.
prominent in public affairs in the city during the period between 1815 and 1838. The table gives the caste, name and occupation of the 'family founder' (paribar pratisthata) and the area of Calcutta where the family house was situated. These were the established Calcutta abhijats, who considered themselves as 'natural leaders' of men,¹ and who according to Bishop Heber lived in 'very large, very fine, generally very dirty houses of Grecian architecture' built amidst the dingy bleak part of the black town² They were the top group (prathamadhara) in Bhavanicharan Banerjee's list of bhadralok, who moved in large carriages and wore fine clothes, and were described as dewans and mucchudis.³ The list is based on 'The accounts of all respectable and opulent natives of the Presidency', originally made by Radhakanta Deb for H.T. Prinsep in 1822, and on another list made in 1839.⁴ It is interesting to note that Rammohun Roy was not included in the list. No doubt this was partly due to Deb's hostility towards the reformer, but I think largely because Rammohun was relatively a newcomer to Calcutta and he had yet to establish himself among the Calcutta abhijats (although Rammohun had business connexions with the city from the end of the eighteenth century, he did not settle down there until 1815). It is equally significant to note that Deb did not think it was necessary to include any Muslim family. It seems that there was no Muslim family in Calcutta rich enough and strong enough to be involved in public affairs.

This list is not complete; it excludes Rammohun Roy and fails to mention many other prominent men like Baidyanath Mukherjee, Motilal Seal, Ramkamal Sen, Hidaram Banerjee's family, Biswnath Motilal, Bhavanicharan Banerjee, Brindaban

3 Bhavanicharan Banerjee, Kalikata Kamalalaya, Calcutta, 1823, as reprinted in 1343, pp. 8–9.

2
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Family History</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Babu Jagannath Prasad and Babu Kashi Prasad</td>
<td>Kayastha</td>
<td>Shyambazar</td>
<td>Descendants of Maharaja Durlabhram; were related by marriage to Raja Rajballabh. Durlabhram and Rajballabh were revenue administrators during the Mughal rule and helped the British in 1757.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Maharaja Rajkrishna Deb</td>
<td>Maulik Kayastha</td>
<td>Sobhabazar</td>
<td>Son of Raja Nubkissen Deb, dewan of Clive and Persian Munshi to the Company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Raja Gopimohun Deb</td>
<td>Maulik Kayastha</td>
<td>Sobhabazar</td>
<td>Gopimohun was adopted son and nephew of Nubkissen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Raja Ramchandra Roy</td>
<td>Subarnavanik</td>
<td>Pathuriaghata</td>
<td>Son of Raja Sukhamoy Roy, dewan of Sir Elijah Impey. Sukamoy's grandfather served as baniyan of Clive and other Governors of Bengal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Gaurcharan and Nimaicharan Mallick</td>
<td>Subarnavanik</td>
<td>Jorasako and Burrabazar</td>
<td>Bankers and businessmen, long established in Calcutta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Babu Srinarayan Singha</td>
<td>Kayastha</td>
<td>Jorasako (?)</td>
<td>Descendants of Dewan Ganga Govind Singha, dewan of the Board of Revenue during the time of Warren Hastings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Kali Sankar Ghoshal</td>
<td>Radi Kulin Brahmin</td>
<td>Khidirpur</td>
<td>Descendants of Gokulchandra Ghoshal, dewan of Verelest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The Tagores</td>
<td>Pirati Brahmin (Bhagna Kulin)</td>
<td>Pathuriaghata, Jorasako and Mechuabazar</td>
<td>Descendants of Darpanarayan, who worked as dewan of the French Company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Gaurcharan Sett and his kinsmen</td>
<td>Weaver</td>
<td>Burrabazar</td>
<td>Shroffs of Calcutta, established since the beginning of the eighteenth century.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Radhakrishna Basak</td>
<td>Weaver</td>
<td>Pathuriaghata</td>
<td>He was born in the family of shroffs who were related by marriage with the Setts of Burrabazar. Radhakrishna dewan in the Sub-Treasurer's Office.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Town</td>
<td>Note</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Ramdoolal Dey</td>
<td>Kayastha</td>
<td>Simla</td>
<td>A shipping magnate started his career as a sarkar (bill collector) at the very low salary of Rs. 5 per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Prankrishna and Jagomohun Biswas</td>
<td>Kayastha</td>
<td>Barrackpore</td>
<td>Ramhari Biswas, father of Prankrishna and Jagomohun, made money as dewan of the salt agent at Chittagang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Rajkrishna Singh and Sibkrishna Singh</td>
<td>Kayastha</td>
<td>Jorasako</td>
<td>Descendants of Santiram Singh, dewan of Sir Thomas Ramsbold and Middleton of Patna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Bhagabaticharan Mitra and Bhavanicharan Mitra</td>
<td>Kulin Kayastha</td>
<td>Bagbazar</td>
<td>Descendants of Govindaram Mitra, dewan of the zamindari office in Calcutta ('The black Collector of Calcutta')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Nabakrishna Mitra</td>
<td>Kulin Kayastha</td>
<td>Bagbazar</td>
<td>Descendants of Gokulchandra Mitra, who made money working as a contractor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Ganganarayan Sarkar</td>
<td>Kayastha (?)</td>
<td>Garanhata</td>
<td>He was a dewan of Palmer and Co</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Premchandra, Ratanchandra and Umeshchandra Palchaudhuri</td>
<td>Tili</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Krishnachandra Palchaudhuri, father of Premchandra and his brother made money working as dewan to the salt agent in Calcutta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Rajnarayan and Rupnarayan Sen</td>
<td>Subarnavanik</td>
<td>Jorbagan</td>
<td>Mothuramohun Sen, father of Rajnarayan and Rupnarayan, was a shroff of Calcutta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Radhamadhbab and Gauricharan Banerjee</td>
<td>Radi Kulin Brahmin</td>
<td>Jorbagan</td>
<td>Descendants of Ramsundar Banerjee, who married into the wealthy family of Rajnarayan Misra and worked as dewan of the opium agent at Patna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Shibnarayan Ghosh</td>
<td>Kulin Kayastha</td>
<td>Pathuriaghata</td>
<td>Ram Gopal Ghosh, father of Shibnarayan, was a sarkar of Warren Hastings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Nilmani Mallick</td>
<td>Subarnavanik</td>
<td>Pathuriaghata</td>
<td>Descendant of Ramkrishna Mallick, a businessman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Rasiklal and Haralal Datta</td>
<td>Kayastha</td>
<td>Nimgtala</td>
<td>Descendants of Madanmohun Datta, the shipping magnate of Calcutta</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mitra, and Kalinath Munshi. In fact, in 1839 another list of
‘eminent natives’ was made to bring Deb’s list up to date.1 In
the 1839 list Calcutta was divided into twenty wards (pallis) and
the names of leading men in each ward were given separately.
This list is fuller than Deb’s list of 1822, for it gives most names
which figure prominently in contemporary newspapers and other
documents and mentions various branches of the Tagore and
Mallick families separately. But the new list still excludes
Rammohun Roy’s family and the short family histories men-
tioned in Deb’s list are missing. However, when we read these
two lists together we get a shrewd idea about the origin and
nature of the Calcutta abhijat bhadralok group, which confirms
the points I have raised before. The nineteenth-century abhijat
bhadralok were new men: not only did they move into the city
during the second half of the eighteenth century, they rose to
high social status in one or two generations. They were of hum-
ble origin, small traders, junior administrators and small land-
holders, who made money working as junior partners (banyan
or dewan) of the English officers and free merchants.

No doubt some of them had already established themselves
during the Mughal rule in Bengal, like the families of Rammo-
hun Roy and Brindaban Mitra. Pitambar Mitra, father of Brin-
daban, was a vakil of the Nawab vizier of Oudh at the Court of
Delhi. But there were many who rose from poverty to wealth.
The great shipping magnate, Ramdoolal Dey, is a good example
of this kind of vertical mobility. He was an orphan, who be-
gan his career as a sarkar (bill collector) at the very low salary
of Rs. 5 a month at Madan Datta’s office in Calcutta. With
careful investment and good luck he became a millionaire in the
nineteenth century. With the growth of ‘consignment trade’
and agency houses he got himself attached as banyan agent to
Fairlie Fergusson and Company. But he also worked as an in-
dependent agent. Foreign traders, especially the Americans,
found it more profitable to do business with Dey than with one
of the established English houses since he charged them a com-

1 S.S.K. (3rd. ed.) Vol. 2, pp. 157–8. I have not yet succeeded in locating
the original copy of Deb’s list which is now incorporated in the 1839 list
(Sept. 1969).
mission of not more than 1 per cent.\textsuperscript{1} He established contacts with the merchants in New York, Boston, Newberry Port, and Philadelphia. His American business friends named a ship after him and sent him a portrait of George Washington as a token of friendship. His name figures prominently in the shipping list of Calcutta port for the years 1817, 1820 and 1824.\textsuperscript{2}

Motilal Seal is another example of this kind of vertical mobility. He was born in Calcutta of a small cloth merchant family. Seal started his career selling empty bottles and corks; by 1820 established himself as a leading merchant, working as banyan to various agency houses, investing in indigo plantations, in flour mills, and purchasing zamindaris.\textsuperscript{3} In the 1830s, after the agency house crisis, he started working as ‘general merchants and agents’ in partnership with Europeans and opened Oswald and Seal and Company.\textsuperscript{4}

Thus the administrative and economic changes created a new subservient capitalist class in Calcutta. They remained interested in commerce and trade throughout 1815 to 1838, even after they purchased large zamindaris and settled down in Calcutta. They flourished because they were still an important link in the British-Indian economic system. Of the 202 proprietors of the Union Bank in 1835, seventy-three were Indians. Of the seventy-three Indian proprietors, seventy were Bengali Hindus, two were Muslims and one was Parsi. There were four Indian directors of the Bank; of them, three were Bengali Hindus, Ashutosh Dey, son of Ramdoolal Dey, Radhamadhab Banerjee and Dwarkanath Tagore.\textsuperscript{5}

This class was predominantly Hindu. No doubt there were

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{The Bengal Almanac and Annual Directory for 1818}, Calcutta, 1818, pp. 153–5, and \textit{The new annual Bengal Directory and general Register for 1820 and 1824} (India Office Library reference ST. 1216). There were two other Bengalis whose names appear in the shipping lists, Davy Persad Ghose and Rajkissen Dutt.
\item \textit{Mutylal Seal, being a lecture delivered by K. C. Mitra}, Calcutta, 1869, pp. 6–16.
\item \textit{Bengal Directory, 1858}, Commercial.
\end{enumerate}
many rich Muslim merchants, like Shaik Abdullah and Shaik Gulam Hosein, whose names appear in the shipping lists for 1815, 1817, 1820 and 1824, who donated regularly to the School Society and School Book Society and who signed various petitions. But they were so-called ‘Mughal merchants’, a marginal social group, isolated from the vast majority of the Bengali Muslim masses and from the other non-Bengali Muslim groups in Calcutta. The Muslims failed to produce an administrative or commercial middle class, not because they were, as a group, averse to English education, nor because they were dispossessed as a community by the new administration (it only dispossessed a section of that community), nor because the British deliberately discouraged the introduction of English education amongst them, but because the vast majority of Muslims had neither the inclination nor the skill required for the type of administrative posts open to the Indians, nor for the areas of economic activity which received a new impetus under the British and opened up opportunities for men to move up in the new world. As early as 1815, Walter Hamilton observed: ‘The men of opulence now in Bengal are Hindu merchants, bankers, and banyans of Calcutta, with a few at the principal provincial stations. The greatest men formerly were the Mahomedan rulers whom the British have superseded and the Hindu zamindars. These two classes are now reduced to poverty and the lower classes look up to the official servants and domestics of the English gentlemen.’

Below this abhijat bhadralok were the large shopkeepers, small traders, small landholders and white-collar workers in commercial houses and government offices, teachers, ‘native doctors’, journalists and writers. These people formed the bulk of the middle group (madhyabitt) in Bhavanicharan Banerjee’s list.

1 The Bengal Almanac and Annual Directory, 1815 and 1818, and The New Annual Bengal Directory, 1820 and 1824.
2 Recently Professor Mallick has argued that the slow growth of English education among the Muslims can be attributed to the British Government’s failure to introduce English education in the Calcutta Madrasa and other Muslim educational institutions. A. R. Mallick, British Policy and the Muslims in Bengal 1757–1838, Dacca, 1961, pp. 166–93.
They were not rich but comfortable (*dhanadya nahen keval annajoge achen*)¹ and followed the leadership of the rich and imitated their life-style. Dwijendranath Tagore described them as *grihasthas* (householders), who formed the lower order of the *bhadralok* group and had accepted the leadership of the *abhi-jats*.² There are no reliable statistics to show how many people belonged to this middle income group. However, as we have already noticed the government appointed a large number of clerks, and since Calcutta was also growing as a commercial city, it is reasonable to suppose that the commercial houses provided a great deal of employment for clerks. We do not have the figures of the number of teachers employed in the city, but, if Adam’s *Reports* are to be believed, then the number of teachers must have substantially increased during the period 1817 to 1838, when the schools, elementary and higher, multiplied so fast that Adam could not include them all in his list.³ We do not know how many Indian doctors were practising in Calcutta, but we do know that, in 1822 when the School for Native Doctors was opened, twenty attended the institution, and by 1826 fifty had gone through the School.⁴

However, we know that the Indians found the press a useful and profitable profession. Although not all Calcutta newspapers were as rich as the *Bengal Hurkaru* (who paid Rs. 800 to its editor, employed seventy people as sub-editors and reporters and had a library and a reading room with gaslight for the use of the public),⁵ many men like Nilratan Haldar, editor of *Bangadoot*, Bhavanicharan Banerjee, editor of *Samachar Chandrika*, made a living as editors of newspapers and periodicals and authors of books and pamphlets. There were others like Ganga Kissore Bhattacharjee, the editor of the *Bengal Gazetteer*, who ‘conceived the idea of printing works in the

² Dwijendranath Thakurer Smritikatha, p. 185.
current language as a means of acquiring wealth".\(^1\) He had his own newspapers and his own press, and wrote and published a number of books. Then there was Babooram, who had similar ideas and worked as H. T. Colebrook's pandit; he later took to printing and publishing and was said to have amassed a fortune of Rupees 1 lakh before he retired in Benaras.\(^2\) It was estimated that some 15,000 Bengali books were sold in Calcutta in ten years between 1811 and 1821. The majority of the books were on Hindu mythology, erotic art and law, some with plates engraved by Harihar Banerjee, whose gods and goddesses were, according to the missionaries, 'stiff and uncouth' but 'tolerably accurate' and 'not discreditable for neatness'.\(^3\)

There were many others employed in the press, or hired by the rich as legal agents, or munshis, or gomasthas (secretaries or managers). These people often lived on the ground floors of the large houses in Calcutta.\(^4\)

IV

Throughout this essay I have referred to the *bhadralok* as a social class. Although it is now fashionable in the academic world\(^5\) to discard the concept of class altogether I still find it a valuable intellectual tool in analysing the social and political development of modern India. Recently the *bhadralok* has been described as a 'status group', not a 'class'. It seems to me that to describe the *bhadralok* as a 'status group' or alternatively a 'mere category' is to ignore the economic changes and the social mobility in Bengal in the nineteenth century.\(^6\)

A class can be described as a social group which holds a common position along some continuum of the economy. This

6 J. H. Broomfield, 'The Non-cooperation decision of 1920: a crisis in Bengal politics', in D. A. Low, *op. cit.*, pp. 231–6, 245–7 and 255–6. At the seminar during the discussion on this paper Mr. R. Guha, of the University of Sussex, called the *bhadralok* 'a mere category not a class'.

continuum need not necessarily be of income or occupation. The position of a class should be understood, as Marx had suggested, in terms of its position in the process of production. Thus in a modern capitalist system there are two important classes, the capitalist, the owners of the means of production, and the proletariat, the producers who sell their labour to the capitalist class. But these are broad categories which helped Marx to ascertain the large groupings characteristic of a developed capitalist system.\(^1\) On this point Weber agrees with Marx; to Weber property and the lack of property were ‘the basic categories of all class situations’.\(^2\) But within these broad categories, class situations are further differentiated, according to, as Weber put it, ‘the kind of property that is usable for returns’ and according to ‘the kind of services that can be offered in the market’.\(^3\) Marx himself recognized the existence of many social classes which played important roles in history. In describing the political situation in France in 1848, Marx distinguished between the finance aristocracy, industrial bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, proletariat, peasantry and lumpenproletariat.\(^4\) The Marxist concept of class is inclusive: it assimilated economic power, market chances, occupational prestige and style of life into class. Weber on the other hand, wanted to distinguish ‘the class situation’ (determined by market chances) from ‘the status situation’ (determined by ‘a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor’).\(^5\) Moreover, to the Marxists, class is always a category for the purpose of the analysis of social conflicts.

In other words a social class is not formed just because a group of people hold a common position in a particular sector of the economy and enjoy a similar life-style but because its members are conscious of their existence as a group and are organized in opposition to other groups. As Marx said ‘In so far


\(^3\) *Ibid.*


as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class.¹ Weber played down the importance of conflict in 'class situations'; he put an undue emphasis on 'communal actions', meaning not actions between members of the same class but actions between members of different classes.

The term 'class' is used here to describe a de facto social group, which holds a common position along some continuum of the economy, enjoys a common style of life and is conscious of its existence as a class organized to further its ends. In contrast to caste society, a class society is an open system, in theory, and, to some extent, in practice. We find that in a modern society, based on a money economy, the distinction between 'class situations' and 'status situations' is more theoretical than real. More often than not the rich enjoy high status in society. Thus 'honor', as Weber himself said, 'can be knit to a class situation'; the style of life and consumption of goods are linked with the acquisition of goods.

In Calcutta, in the nineteenth century, class was one dimension of social stratification which determined social relationships in the city. If we use Marxian class analysis then Indian society in Calcutta was divided into two classes. There was the abhijat bhadralok, the big zamindars, merchants and top administrators, who were the owners of land and capital (although as a capitalist class they were subservient to the British). Then there were the dockers, the builders, the workers, the domestics, the palanquin bearers and other wage-earners—a large migrant labour force, some of whom came from Orissa and the Up Country, formed the class of producers. The relationship between these two classes was contractual and economic, and was not determined by caste or custom.

Between these two groups there was already growing, as we have noticed, a middle class, the grihastha bhadralok, whom in

1829 the Bangadoot referred to as maddhyabitto sreni.\textsuperscript{1} The shopkeepers, small zamindars, small merchants and white-collar workers belonged to this group. However, this had not yet crystallized into a homogeneous social class. They accepted the leadership of the abhijat and imitated their life-style. They were dubbed together with the abhijat by the English officers as ‘the educated natives’ to distinguish them as a group from the old ‘nobility’ and the masses.\textsuperscript{3} The line of demarcation between the abhijat and the grihastha is not very clear; after all, the rich bhadralok emerged from a new ‘middle class’, who were considered as ‘upstarts’ by many.\textsuperscript{4} Although the abhijats were rich, enjoyed high status, and exercised considerable power in Calcutta, their subservience to the British and their imitation of the life-style of the colonial elite and the Mughal courtiers made all bhadralok, rich and of the middle-income group, in this sense, part of a ‘new middle class’.

The class situation in Calcutta can be compared and contrasted with the class situation in England in the early nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution brought about profound social and economic changes; the steam engine broke the eighteenth-century pyramidal structure of English society. England witnessed not only what Engels called the disintegration of society into individuals but also the carving-out of classes.\textsuperscript{4} Before the rise of a politically conscious working-class movement, a class struggle was waged by the middle class against ‘aristocratic tyranny’ and ‘hereditary opulence’. In contrast, in Calcutta, there was no Industrial Revolution, no large-scale introduction of the steam engine to break down the old social structure completely. Yet the market in land, trade and commerce brought about a significant social change, and Bengal witnessed the rise of a new middle class. This class was less aggressive and less homogeneous than its English counterpart but it was equally articulate in politics.

\textsuperscript{1} Bangadoot, 13 June 1829, as reprinted in S.S.K, Vol. 1, p. 398.
\textsuperscript{2} H. T. Prinsep, Three generations in India 1770-1904, I.O.L. MSS. Eur. C97/1, 1 and 3.
\textsuperscript{3} ‘Mookerjee’s Magazine’ as quoted in N. N. Ghose, Memoirs of Maharaja Nabkissen Bahadur, p. 171.
There was in fact in Bengal no conflict between trade and the land, nor between the 'old zamindars' and the 'new zamindars'. No doubt many old zamindaris were bought off by the abhijat bhadralok, and there was some resentment against the nouveaux riches amongst the 'old aristocracy', but there was no class struggle between the bhadralok and the 'old aristocracy'. The tension between the family of Nubkissen and that of the Maharaja of Krishnagar, over the family idol, was a family feud not a class struggle. In fact the 'ancient families' were respected by the bhadralok. It was Radhakanta Deb, grandson of Nubkissen, who in 1838 proposed that the Maharaja of Krishnagar should be asked to be the President of the Zamindar Sabha, since he came from the 'most ancient lineage' in Bengal.\(^1\) In some areas the 'ancient families' still exercised considerable influence. If Ram Ram Bose is to be believed, the descendants of Raja Basanta Roy (uncle of Pratapaditya Roy, one of the Bengali chieftains who fought the Mughals in the seventeenth century) were still respected in Jessore, and were leaders (Goshtipati) of Bangaja Kayasthas in that district.\(^2\)

Similarly the bhadralok had a deep respect for the Mughal nobility. In 1842 Radhakanta Deb went to pay his homage to the Nawab Nazim of Murshidabad on his way to Gaya.\(^3\) Ram Mohun Roy proclaimed his allegiance to the family of Babar and accepted the title of Raja conferred upon him by Akbar II.

However there was some hostility towards the lower orders, the dockers, palankin bearers and other wage-earners in Calcutta, and the tenants and the landless labourers in the rural area. The bhadralok attempted to resist the wage demands of the palankin bearers by various means, fair and foul, and complained in their newspapers that money was being drained out of Bengal by the Oriya palankin bearers.\(^5\) Dwarkanath Tagore, 'a Hindoo of an

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4 *A rapid sketch of the life of Raja Radhakanta Deva Bahadur with some notices of his ancestors and testimonials of his character and learning*, Calcutta, 1859, p. 22.
enlarged mind, and a truly British spirit', as he was known to his English friends, did not hesitate in bullying a corrupt magistrate to break up an ekjoti (rent-strike) amongst his tenants.\footnote{R. M. Martin, *Statistics of the Colonies of the British Empire*...p. 289, Cf. K. C. Mittra, *Memoir of Dwarkanath Tagore*, Calcutta, 1870, pp. 16–19.}

Many were afraid that the spread of English education among the lower classes would hurt the interests of the bhadralok; they would demand higher wages, equality and even the jobs so dearly held by the bhadarlok. *Samachar Chandrika* claimed that the demand for higher wages and the lack of washermen in Calcutta were due to the spread of education among the lower classes.\footnote{*Samachar Chandrika*, 12 May 1830, pp. 144–5.}

Thus, although there was no sharp class struggle of the type England had witnessed under the impact of the Industrial Revolution, and the interrelationship between classes was not one of continuous conflict, many social conflicts and collective activities can only be understood in terms of class. Not all social relationships in Calcutta were determined by class; society as a whole was not just separated, as some of the missionaries thought, into two 'classes, the borrower and the usurer, the industrious though exhausted poor, and the fat and flourishing money-lender'.\footnote{The Friend of India. Vol. I, p. 90.}

The people were also separated into communities and castes. Nevertheless, the importance of class as one dimension of social stratification in Calcutta cannot be denied.

The caste structure in Bengal during the pre-colonial period was less rigid than it is supposed to have been in other parts of India. The Bengali Brahmans, though enjoying a very high ritual status, never had that exclusive high social and economic status which the Brahmans in South India had enjoyed in the past.\footnote{André Béteille, *Caste, Class and Power*, Berkeley, 1963, pp. 3–10 and 191–2.} The Brahmans had to share the economic and social power with other castes. Traditionally, the Hindu community in Bengal was divided into two varnas, Brahm and Shudra. The Shudras were further subdivided into three groups: clean, unclean and untouchable. All jatis in Bengal were fitted into these four broad
categories, Brahmans, clean Shudras, unclean Shudras and untouchables; there were at least forty-one jatis in Bengal.¹

Two caste groups, Kayastha and Baidya, enjoyed a very high social and political status along with the Brahmin, although their ritual status was rather low. They had the monopoly of the educational system, and held important administrative posts; being landowners they controlled the agrarian economy. According to Abu-ul-Fazl, the majority of the Bengali zamindars in the sixteenth century were Kayasthas.² By the eighteenth century large zamindars were almost invariably Brahmans. According to Hamilton a large number of the Brahmans were also employed as ‘managers’ of zamindaris belonging to other castes. They could obtain land leases on better terms and were exempted from ‘various impositions and extortions to which the inferior classes are exposed’.³ Thus in some parts of Bengal, in the eighteenth century, the Brahmans exercised considerable influence by combining their high ritual status with political and economic power. However, the Baidyas and Kayasthas were equally important, the majority of the administrative posts were held by them, many small zamindaris were under their control, and, while the Kayastha monopolized the vernacular educational system, the Baidyas shared the knowledge of Sanskrit with the Brahmans.⁴ It would seem that the Brahmin, Baidya, and Kayastha together formed a sub-elite group in the power structure of the traditional society; all rulers of Bengal, the Palas, Senas, Pathans, and Mughals had to rely on their support.

Despite the social upheaval, the Brahmans, Kayasthas and Baidyas continued to exercise considerable power in Calcutta. At least twelve out of the twenty-three families mentioned in Table 4 were Kayasthas, and three were Brahmans. L. N. Ghose, ¹ For a stimulating discussion on the caste structure in medieval Bengal see N. Ray, Bangalir Itihas, Adi parva, Calcutta, 1359, pp. 257–323. Cf. W. Ward, A view of the history, literature and mythology of the Hindoos, London, 1817–20, Vol. 3, pp. 94–143.
⁴ Sir William Jones was taught Sanskrit by a Baidya teacher; see S. N. Mukherjee, Sir William Jones, p. 195.
writing during the second half of the century, gave a list of sixty eminent families of Calcutta, thirty-four of which were Kayasthas, eleven were Brahmins and one was Baidya. Educational records of Bengal of this period also show that the majority of men who went for higher education came from these three castes. This factor has led many scholars, old and new, to believe that the bhadralok was a traditional elite, consisting of Brahmin, Baidya and Kayastha, which continued to enjoy high status and exercise power as junior administators and landowners throughout the nineteenth century. However this view fails to recognize that, in contrast to caste, the bhadralok was an open de facto social group. Although the bhadralok was almost exclusively a Hindu group, caste had no part in the selection; men who held a similar economic position, enjoyed a similar style of living and received a similar education were considered as bhadralok. Men like Motilal Seal, a Subarnavanik (unclean Shudra), and Gaurchand Basak, a Weaver, although of very low ritual status, were leading bhadralok of Calcutta. In Table 4 we have the names of families belonging to such castes, Subarnavanik and Weaver. Even L. N. Ghose included six Subarnavaniks, one Weaver, one Brazier, one Sadgop, one Tili, and one Kaibartya (not to mention the Parsi, Khetri and Muslim families) in his list of eminent men of Calcutta. The lives of the Bengali abhijat bhadralok proved, as the nineteenth-century biographer of Ramdoolal Dey put it, that ‘there is an aristocracy which is not born but may be made’. Those who could acquire enough wealth, English education, and high status through administrative service, belonged to this ‘new aristocracy’, and since a large number of Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas had administrative skill, and economic incentives, they formed the bulk of the bhadralok. The majority of the Brahmins and Kayasthas, poor and illiterate, were not considered as bhadralok. According to Ward three-quarters of the total

number of Brahmins in Calcutta and the Twenty-Four Parganas, were domestics.¹

Despite the Brahminical laws, a caste in Bengal, at least since the eighteenth century, was not a hereditary occupational group. In 1795, Colebrook noticed that every profession, with few exceptions, was open to ‘every description of persons’. ‘Brahmins are often employed in the most servile office and the Sudras often elevated to situations of respectability and importance.’² In 1815 Hamilton confirmed this view: ‘commerce and agriculture are universally permitted to all classes and under the general designation of servants to the other three tribes, the Sudras seem to be allowed to prosecute any manufacture. In this tribe are included not only the true Sudras, but also other castes ...daily observation shews even Brahmins exercising the menial profession of a Sudra.’³ Rickards also observed the diversity of castes among the workers in various industries. ‘He noticed five or six different castes working as carpenters and as many different castes working as bricklayers, often even employed to work on the same building.’⁴

Social mobility in Bengal could be noticed even in the rural areas, in the traditional educational system. Adam’s Reports show that teachers in vernacular elementary schools came chiefly from the Kayastha caste. In Bengal, however, castes both superior and inferior to the Kayasthas had invaded the profession. In contrast, in Bihar the monopoly of the Kayasthas had not been challenged. In the traditional society vernacular education was particularly suitable for the Kayastha caste, a fixed stratum somewhere in the middle of a relatively stable social pyramid. In Bengal, from the eighteenth century, no stratum could be permanently fixed. William Adam himself considered this to be a sign of social change: ‘Both the Bengal and Behar districts need an improved system of vernacular instruction; but

¹ W. Ward, A view of the history...of the Hindoos, p. 86 n.
² H. T. Colebrook, Remarks on the present state of the husbandry and commerce of Bengal, Calcutta, 1795, p. 133.
³ W. Hamilton, The East India Gazetteer, 1828, p. 132.
⁴ R. Rickards, India: or facts submitted to illustrate the character and condition of the native inhabitants with suggestions for reforming the present system of government, London, 1829–32, Vol. 1, p. 32.
the former appear to have undergone a social change, partaking the nature of a moral and intellectual discipline, which removes prejudices still to be met and provides facilities not yet to be found in the latter.'

In Calcutta, professions old and new, high and low, were open to all caste groups. The lists of *shroffs* (money-lenders) of Calcutta show that this old profession was not monopolized by any single caste group. The caste breakdown of the students of the Medical College given in Table 5 shows that only three out of fifty students in 1839 were *Baidyas* (whose traditional occupation was medicine).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.</th>
<th><em>The students of Calcutta Medical College</em></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmin</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Baidya</em></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kayashtha</em></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druggist</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaver</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If castes in Calcutta could not be regarded as hereditary occupational groups then the intercaste relationships and the caste hierarchical order were also undergoing profound changes. The taboos regarding food and pollution could not be enforced rigidly, where the Brahmin had to share the same civic amenities along with other castes—often living in the same street—and when they had to work in an office all day or conduct business at the docks. In about 1821, a book called *Karmalochan* was published, which listed the daily religious duties that a pious Hindu should perform. The publisher soon discovered that men in Calcutta were reluctant to purchase the work, 'as the instances of their religious omissions were so numerously recorded in it, that they were afraid of being reduced to beggary, by imposition of fines from the Brahmin on account of neglect of religious rites.' In fact, it was widely believed outside Calcutta that the

1 W. Adam, *Reports on the state of education in Bengal*, p. 249.
2 General Committee of Public Instruction, *Report on the colleges and schools for native education... in Bengal for 1838–9*, Calcutta, 1840, p. 42.
bhadralok had ‘fallen from the approved usage’ (acharbhrasta). It would also seem that no particular area was allocated to any particular caste as it had been in the traditional village society. This is demonstrated in Table 4. In Pathuriaghata there were Radi Kulin Brahmis like Baidyanath Mukherjee, Kayasthas like Ramlochan Ghosh, Pirali Brahmis like Gopimohun Tagore, Subarnanikus like Nilmani Mallick and Weavers like Radhakrishna Basak. Pathuriaghata was no exception; all areas in the Indian part of the town were adorned with large houses of the multi-caste abhijat bhadralok.

In the new schools and colleges boys from different castes mixed freely. There was no caste privilege in the classrooms or in the playgrounds. In David Hare’s school Ramtoonu Lahiri, a poor Barendra Kulin Brahmin pupil from Krishnagar used to be bullied by his class monitor called Aditya, who was a WASherman by caste. This free mixing left a deep imprint, which had a far-reaching influence outside the school compounds. The Enquirer, the mouth piece of Young Bengal, observed, ‘boys of different castes can never long remain on an equal footing in a class without forgetting and giving up their distinctions’. Menfolk, like their sons, mixed freely at business, at school committees, at public meetings, in sabhas, and other public gatherings. The family functions of the abhijat bhadralok, marriages, sradhs, pujas were transformed into multi-caste social gatherings, and were celebrated with great pomp and splendour. The barowaree or later the sarvajanin pujas, were invented in response to urban life. These pujas were not performed in temples or in family chapels but by ‘subscription assemblies’, annually formed for this purpose only. By the end of the nineteenth century almost every area in Calcutta had such multi-caste ‘subscription assemblies’.

Caste, however, remained important, as we shall see, in relation to marriage and inheritance. The rich members of

1 Bhavanicharan Banerjee, Kalikata Kamalalaya, p. 8.
ritually low caste started to establish horizontal links with caste brothers outside their regions and began movements to improve their ritual status. The Baidyas were the first caste to take steps in this direction. In the eighteenth century, under the leadership of Raja Rajballabh, some of them started wearing the ‘sacred thread’ and declared themselves ‘twice born’. Since 1822 there had been continuous pamphlet warfare between the Brahmin and Baidya pandits of Calcutta over the ritual status of the Baidyas. In 1831, the Baidya doctors, under the leadership of Khudiram Bisharad, who was a teacher of medicine at the Sanskrit College, formed the Baidya Samaj, to defend their caste privileges. Although it was primarily for the Baidya medical practitioners, the leading members of the caste like Ramkamal Sen gave the new Samaj their full support. The ritual status of the Brahmins was also challenged in Calcutta. In 1832, Dharma Sabha called a special meeting to discuss a crucial question concerning the Brahmin-Shudra relationship; they debated whether a Shudra (if he was a Vaishnava) could claim ‘reverence’ from the Brahmin. But despite the evidence of caste consciousness and the importance of caste rules in marriage and inheritance, class consciousness, breaking down the caste barriers, is noticeable. Although the bhadralok had yet to evolve a class ideology, they were conscious of their existence as a social group and had every confidence in themselves as an agency for change. They increased in number and in strength during the 1820s. In 1829 Nilratan Haldar wrote that the rise of this ‘new class’ (nutan sreni), whom he earlier referred to as madhyabitto, would bring ‘economic prosperity’ and ‘political stability’ in Bengal.

A quantitative study of the housing situation in Calcutta con-

1 W. Ward, A View of the history...of the Hindoos, p. 95.
4 Bhavanicharan Banerjee, Biprabhakti chandrika; cf Bai[rava] Chandra Datta, Sri Sri Vaishnava bhakti kaumudi. These two pamphlets are reprinted in N. N. Law, Subarnavanik, katha o kirti, Calcutta, 1940, Vol. 1, pp. 50–64.
firms the view that many new bhadralok moved into the city during the first four decades of the century. By and large the Indians lived in two types of houses, brick buildings for the higher classes and tiled huts and straw huts for the lower classes. It seems that there was a considerable decrease in the total number of houses in Calcutta, in each successive period since 1793, shown in Table 6. The reason for this decrease was not the depopulation of Calcutta but the erection of new and large houses by the wealthy classes, including the English, which meant the demolition of the huts. During the years between 1822 and 1827, while 6,000 huts disappeared, over 3,000 new brick buildings went up as the city became larger and more prosperous.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of houses</th>
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<tr>
<td>1793</td>
<td>74,760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1822</td>
<td>67,511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1837</td>
<td>65,469</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

V

The class of abhijat bhadralok was undoubtedly one of the most important agencies for change in nineteenth-century Bengal. It would be true to say that it was their class interest which stirred them most; the economic issues such as stamp duties, house tax, the resumption of la-ki-raj (rent-free) land, and the general fear that the government might interfere with landed property forced all abhijat bhadralok, of all shades of opinion, into agitational movements. They organized public meetings, wrote petitions and in 1838 founded the first political association in India, the Landholders' Society. Many of their other public activities were also economically motivated: they were eager to introduce modern banking, steam navigation and tea plantation. Many invested money and took an active interest in

1 This table is made from the list of houses printed in C. Finch, 'Vital statistics of Calcutta', p. 170. The process of replacing huts by large houses continued throughout the nineteenth century. This was no doubt partly due to the 1837 Municipal Regulation, which required all straw huts to be removed, but largely due to 'the increased trade and prosperity of the town'. See Report of the census of Calcutta, 1866, pp. 13 and 25.
the scheme to colonize Saugar Island. They were all in favour of the modernization and commercialization of the economy of Bengal. However, they were also inspired by ideas which reached them from Europe through books, through personal contacts with some of the more enlightened European officials, the missionaries and the free traders, men like Justice Hyde East, David Hare and James Silk Buckingham. The bhadralok had faith in reform and in their ability to change their destiny. In this sense they were all agents of 'modernity'; rising above local and parochial ties, they felt that they had commitments to larger communities. They organized meetings to raise funds to help famine-stricken Ireland, for flood-relief in Barishal or to help the sick migrant labourer in Calcutta. Rammohun Roy went further than most in wanting to make common cause with the 'fighters' for 'liberty' everywhere in England, France, Spain and Latin America.

They were all deeply interested in science and in 'useful knowledge'. Rammohun Roy implored the government 'to instruct the natives of India in Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy and other useful sciences, which the Nations of Europe have carried to a degree of perfection that has raised them above the inhabitants of other parts of the world'. Dwarkanath Tagore was interested in the application of modern science to industry. He also donated large sums to Calcutta Medical College and gave scholarships for medical students. He used to be present at the dissection room of the

5 K. C. Mittra, Memoir of Dwarkanath Tagore, pp. 29, 69 and 107. Cf. Shivanath Shastri, Ramtonu Lshiri o taikalin Banga samaj, p. 171. Four medical students, Bhananath Bose, Suryakumar Chakravarti, Dwarkanath Bose and Gopal Seal, accompanied Tagore to England in 1845. Tagore provided money for the education of Bose and Chakravarti. It was the very first group of Indian students to go to England for higher studies.
College to discourage prejudice against modern medicine. Radhakanta Deb was an active member of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society; for a time he served as its vice-president and wrote scholarly papers for it. He helped, to introduce smallpox vaccination, attended regularly 'the experiments in the Medical College' and 'every lecture on Natural Philosophy at the houses of his European friends'. Ramkamal Sen sat on a committee which recommended the foundation of Calcutta Medical College, and also on the Fever Hospital Committee which made a number of suggestions for improving the drainage and sanitation of the city. They all helped to further the cause of English education.

The formal political aims of this class were very limited. Recognizing that their interests were tied to the colonial set-up, they all wanted to work within the framework of the British-Indian administration; no one wanted to rock the boat. No one, not even the young radical students, wanted to follow the American example; any leaning in that direction was sharply rebuked. In 1838, when the Calcutta bhadralok made a membership drive for their Landholders' Society in the mofussil areas, they were careful to mention that their activities had the support of the British government. Almost all petitions, whether they were protests against the Press Regulation of 1823 or against the resumption of the lu-ki-raj land in 1828 or about the right of the Indians to sit as jurors on the Grand and Petty Juries, started with a preamble which listed the benefits that the natives of India had received from the Company's rule. The Regulations of Cornwallis, particularly the one on the Permanent Settlement, formed the 'Magna Carta' of the bhadralok. They held their alien rulers to the promise of the 'rule of law' and 'the security of property' implied in the Cornwallis system. However

1 A rapid sketch..., p 30.
4 The Landholders' society, Preface.
5 For the texts of some of these petitions see Ahmed, Social ideas and social change in Bengal, 1818–1835, pp. 173–90.
‘the system’ was not perfect for it deprived Indians of high administrative posts. Under the Company’s government, the politically ambitious bhadralok could do little. He could not dream of getting elected or nominated to the Governor’s legislative council as his descendants could during the second half of the century; he could not even be a corporation councillor, as local government was beyond the control of the bhadralok. Although the bhadralok wanted to work within the framework of the British-Indian administration, they also wanted minor readjustments of existing institutions, to give a better deal for Indians. Indians should be allowed to sit as jurors on the Grand and Petty Juries, work as Justices of the Peace and have some say in the running of local government in Calcutta, to be selected as collectors of revenue or to be promoted to similar high posts in the district headquarters or in the Revenue and Judicial Department.¹

To achieve these ends the bhadralok had to create a strong pressure of public opinion in India and Britain on the British government to concede to Indian demands. The medium through which this was done was new to India; it included the press, public meetings, petitions and associations. If the Indian elites, in the twentieth century, are steeped in the grammar of modern politics, then the bhadralok of Calcutta had started to learn its alphabet during the 1820s. They had yet to evolve a political programme and a political association. But through the process of trial and error, working as has been seen earlier in school committees, organizing public meetings, forming sabhas for social and educational purposes, or for religious movements like Brahma Samaj and Dharma Sabha, organizing signature campaigns, waging pamphlet wars for some worthy and also some unworthy causes, the bhadralok learnt the techniques of modern politics. This was the beginning of what came to be known as the constitutional agitation.

Admittedly, some of the protest meetings and petitions were European-inspired, if not European-controlled. There was a

deep division of opinion within the European community, especially between the free traders and the Company officials, on such issues as the restrictions on the free employment of European capital and skill in India. During the years immediately before the revival of Company’s Charter in 1833, free traders mounted a strong agitation in India and in England against the Company. Many protest meetings were held in Calcutta during the late 1820s and in the 1830s, chiefly to petition to Parliament to meet the grievances of the free traders, on colonization, on the restriction of the press, or against the so-called Black Act. They were organized by such men as Theodore Dickens and Thomas Turton, English merchants and lawyers in Calcutta. However, they were able to enlist the support of many bhadralok and other ‘respectable natives’ of the city. The Company officials on their part also succeeded in stirring up Indian opinion against the unrestricted employment of European skill and capital in Bengal. On this issue, the Samachar Chandrika echoed John Bull, a pro-government English newspaper established in 1821.

It would be wrong to think that the bhadralok followed their European friends and patrons passively. They took an active part in organizing such meetings. They spoke from the platforms, signed petitions and joined committees. They were aware that on many issues their interests were tied up with those of the Europeans. Dwarkanath Tagore, speaking at a public meeting held in protest against the ‘Black Act’, recognized this community of interest: ‘we support not only their cause, which in gratitude we are bound to do, but our own’. The Indians, he claimed, suffered from similar Black Acts; in mofussil areas a man could be sent to prison for seven years without the right to appeal against such conviction. He urged his countrymen to help the Europeans: ‘the mischief that has commenced will go

1 Ahmed, Social ideas and social change in Bengal, 1818–1835, pp. 9–10. The Act XI of 1836 of the Legislative Council was called ‘The Black Act’ by the Europeans for it deprived them of their rights to appeal to English Courts of law against the decisions of the ‘Mofussil Tribunals’.
2 Calcutta, Meeting at the Town Hall on 5 January 1835 (a pamphlet issued by the editor of Bengal Hurkaru), Calcutta, 1835.
on unless we all come forward and support each other to put a
check on it'.

Many protest meetings were organized, and many petitions
were sent to Parliament by the bhadralok independently of and
sometimes against the interests of the European residents and
the wishes of the Company officials. The Jury Act of 1826 failed
to satisfy the bhadralok and other 'natives of wealth and talent
in Calcutta'. This Act allowed 'all good and sufficient persons
resident within the limits of the several towns of Calcutta,
Madras and Bombay...[to] be deemed capable of serving as
jurors on Grand or Petty Juries and upon all other inquests'.
However, it added another clause which stipulated 'that Grand
Juries in all cases, and all Juries for the trial of persons professing
the Christian Religion, shall consist wholly of persons professing
the Christian Religion'. This successfully prevented Indians
from sitting on the Grand Juries and Petty Juries for the trial of
Europeans; the bhadralok complained against this racial discrimi-
ination in their newspapers and threatened not to serve in
Petty Juries if summoned to do so. They collected two hundred
and forty-four signatures to petition to Parliament to repeal this
discriminatory clause from the Act and Rammohun Roy lobbied
for them in England. Finally, in 1832 Parliament passed a bill,
which was initiated by Charles Grant, which not only repealed
the objectionable clause but allowed Indians to work as Justices
of the Peace Many other petitions and agitational movements,
like that against the resumption of the la-ki-raj land, were also

1 Calcutta. Report of a public meeting held at the Town Hall, Calcutta. on
2 George IV 7, Cap. 37, in I O.L. Parliamentary branch collections, no. 1,
pp. 317–8. The petition against this Act was signed by 128 Hindus and
116 Muslims.
3 Samachar Darpan, 3 Feb. 1827, and Samachar Chandrika, 16 June 1827.
S.S.K. Vol. 1, pp. 201–3. But the bhadralok did not have the courage
to carry out their threat; in 1828 three Bengalis were selected to serve
on the Petty Juries; they were Bhavanicharan Banerjee, Krishnamohun
Dey and Tarinicharan Mitra, and they carried out their duties without
4 R. Roy, 'Extracts from a letter on Grant's Jury Bill', India Gazettee, 22
Jan. 1833, as reprinted in The English works of Raja Rammohun Roy,
conducted by the bhadralok independently. These examples show that they had already learnt to use the modern political idiom. H.T. Prinsep noticed the contrast between the Calcutta he left in 1843 and the Calcutta he found on his arrival in 1809. The most marked difference was observable amongst the natives of whom there were now large classes, who imitated the English in manners and rivalled them even in literary attainments. Their education was often superficial and they mostly over-estimated the advantage they derived from it; still they formed a separate public of their own, which had no existence at all when I arrived in 1809 and was daily increasing in influence.¹

It is important to remember that the ‘native public opinion’ which was so noticeable in 1843 began to make itself heard from the end of the 1820s. By then the bhadralok had gained at least ten years’ experience in journalism and in public work.

It has already been noticed how the press in Calcutta provided a livelihood for a number of editors, authors and printers. The bhadralok were quick to recognize the importance of the press as a weapon for agitational movements. In 1830 there were at least seven Bengali, Persian and Nagari weekly newspapers, of which five were owned and edited by the bhadralok. Two of these, Sangbad Kaumudi (founded in 1821) and Samachar Chandrika (founded in 1822), were well established, and competed with each other to gain more readers in Calcutta and in the mofussil towns. Many English weeklies like the Bengal Herald were controlled by the Bengalis, and some of them had also established a financial interest in some English daily newspapers, like the Bengal Hurkaru. In the early part of the 1830s there was a rush by the bhadralok to publish new newspapers or gain control over those already established.² Not surprisingly the bhadralok were as anxious to defend the free press as the European free traders.

In 1822, when some of the abhijat bhadralok gathered to draft a farewell address to the departing Governor General, the Marquis of Hastings, Gopimohun Deb and his son Radhakanta Deb suggested that a clause should be included in the

¹ H. T. Prinsep, ‘Three generations in India’, p. 263.
address to congratulate Lord Hastings for abolishing the censorship of the press in Bengal.¹ In 1823, Rammohun Roy and his friends were most active in petitioning against new press regulations, introduced by John Adam.² In 1835, the Indians joined the Europeans in a large meeting held at the Calcutta Town Hall, to protest against the continued restrictions on the press. Among the ninety-three signatories seeking permission to hold the meeting were Rustomjee Cowasjee, a Parsee merchant, and eight bhadralok, Rasick Krishna Mullick, Dwarkanath Tagore, Kalinath Roy, Rassomoy Dutt, Radhamadhab Banerjee, Ashutosh Dey, Promothonath Dey and Chandra Shekhar Deb.³

The foundation of Atmiya Sabha in 1815, as the first organization for collective thinking, discussion, and reform, marks the beginning of the modern age in Calcutta. No doubt it had a far-reaching effect on the history of the social reform movement. However, the meetings of the Atmiya Sabha were informal gatherings of a small elite, who dared to denounce the orthodox religion.⁴ There was no formal organization, no constitution, and no programme for action. It was in the field of education and ‘public welfare’, in the School Book Society and the School Society, in the Committee of Managers of Hindu College, that the bhadralok gained valuable organizational experience. They sat on committees which had to function according to a written set of rules, drawn up by the founders. They learnt the techniques of fund-raising, and, in the case of the School Book Society, of establishing contact in the mofussil areas through agents. They organized public examinations of school pupils under the management of the School Society, and launched a publicity campaign through the press. They also established contacts, no doubt through the Europeans, with similar societies in Bombay and in London.⁵ It is interesting to note that many

³ Calcutta, Meeting at the Town Hall, pp. 2–3.
⁴ For the history of Atmiya Sabha see Tatvabodhini Patrika, no 50, Asvin 1769 (Saka era).
of their sabhas, like Gauriya Samaj in 1823 and Dharma Sabha in 1830, were modelled after the School Book Society and the School Society. They drew up a similar set of rules and regulations which governed the formal structures of their societies.\(^1\)

It was important for the ambitious bhadralok to be on the school committees, and in the societies for public welfare and social reform. This area of public activity was not directly under the control of the government; here they could exercise considerable power, influencing the policies of institutions, appointing or sacking teachers, nominating students and controlling finance.\(^2\) Men who wished to gain the leadership of Calcutta society had to be involved in these activities. The leading men would be invited to tea parties at the Bishop of Calcutta’s house, or to the receptions at Government House, or at the end of the period would be nominated as jurors on the Grand Jury or as Justices of the Peace or appointed to such semi-official bodies as the General Committee for Public Instruction. In short, the abhijat bhadralok who were active in educational and social reform were respected by their fellow countrymen, and the government accepted them as representatives of ‘native opinion’. It was natural that there should be such keen competition to gain control of schools and other societies.\(^3\)

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2 The Government of the College was vested in a committee of Managers consisting of Hereditary Governors (‘contributors of 5,000 rupees and upward to the College Fund before the aggregate sum of a lakh and a half of sicca rupees may have been subscribed to that fund’). Governors for life (‘contributors of 5,000 rupees and upwards after the target of one and a half lakh of rupees had been reached), and Directors, annually elected by subscribers, whose joint or separate subscriptions to its college amounted to at least 5,000 rupees. The committee of managers consisted entirely of Hindu bhadralok who had complete power over the running of the college. Since 1824, however, the government had tried to control the policy of the college, through H. H. Wilson who was nominated as the Visitor of the college. Government of Bengal, Education Department, Presidency College Register, Calcutta, 1927, pp. 5–6.

3 In 1833 the Calcutta Supreme Court nominated seven Indians to the Grand Jury.
There was a deep division of opinion and rivalry between groups within the *bhadrakok* class. Although there was a wide spectrum of views, ranging from Bhavanicharan Banerjee’s to those of the young students of Hindu College, the *bhadrakok* of Calcutta could be divided into two large groups, as we have already noticed, the ‘liberals’ led by Rammohun Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore and the ‘conservatives’ led by Gopimohun Deb and his son Radhakanta Deb.

However, these ideological labels had limited application. There was no deep division of opinion over any important political issue except on European colonization. But there are good reasons to believe that on this issue the ‘conservatives’ were largely influenced by some Company officials, who on their part supported the ‘conservatives’ on sati.¹ The liberal-nationalists and some Marxist historians have presented Rammohun Roy and his *Brahmo Samaj* movement as the only agents of modernity, who had to wage war against the orthodox party led by Deb. All too often, the contribution made by Deb, Sen, Seal and other ‘conservatives’ to the cause of modernity is glossed over. Some have even tried to discover a class basis for the ideological cleavage. Professor Ahmed suggested that the ‘conservatives’ ‘had more links with land than with trade’, whereas the ‘liberals’ were largely merchants.² This is rather too simple. It has already been noticed that the *bhadrakok*, ‘conservative’ or ‘liberal’, was deeply interested in modernizing the economy, was involved in trade and had invested money in land. Radhamadhab Banerjee, a member of the orthodox *Dharma Sabha*, was a director of the Union Bank and Dwarkanath Tagore, the ‘liberal’, was a big landlord.

In fact in our analysis of the social and political development of Calcutta in the nineteenth century we should not look at modernity in opposition to tradition. The ‘conservatives’ were interested in English education, modern science, and in modernization of the economy. Radhakanta Deb, a Director of Hindu College, a member of the Calcutta School Book Society and the native Secretary of the Calcutta School Society,

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did more than his 'liberal' opponents for the encouragement of English education. It was in his father's house that the Calcutta School Society held their annual examinations and prize-giving ceremonies.\(^1\) They were as much interested as Rammohun Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore 'to raise the natives of India to a higher state of civilization and welfare'.\(^2\) But if the 'conservatives' acted as the agents of modernity then the 'liberals' were not so alienated from tradition as they have often been presented to us.

Dwarkanath Tagore, despite his zeal for the Vaidantic religion, did not hesitate to give a feast to the _Chaubey_ in Vrindavan, and to feed over 50,000 Brahmans and others during the _sradha_ ceremony of his mother.\(^3\) Prasannakumar Tagore, another member of the _Brahmo Samaj_, performed the family _Durga Puja_ with the pomp and splendour that befits an _abhijat bhadralok_, for which, however, he earned a nickname, the 'half-enlightened' reformer.\(^4\) But this snide remark from the young radical students was unjustified, since 'the Father of Modern India' himself was unwilling to give up his 'sacred thread'. Also, through his _Brahmo Samaj_, Rammohun Roy ceremoniously donated to the Brahmans, every year, as a _bhadralok_ should do. In England, although he accepted invitations to dine with Europeans, 'his food is solely vegetables or sweetmeats, as he conforms in every essential particular to the habits of his country'.\(^5\) Others, like the Basaks, as we have already noticed, found no particular difficulty in following the traditional religion and being engaged in reform.

There was a difference of opinion dividing the _bhadralok_. Rammohun Roy believed that 'the organization of society' depended on religion. Since Hinduism had imposed unnecessary

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1 _The Calcutta annual register for the 1821_, Calcutta, 1823, pp. 79–80.
2 Radhakanta Deb to W. H. MacNaughton, 9 Nov. 1835, in Banerjee _I.H.R.C._ Vol. 9, p. 106.
restrictions on the Hindus, which denied them 'social comfort' and disqualified them from entering into 'difficult enterprises', he insisted that some religious reform was essential at least 'for the sake of their [Indians'] political and social comfort'. When *sati* was abolished, he wrote to his friends in England, that since the Act had 'removed the odium from our character as a people... we now deserve every improvement temporal and spiritual'.

The 'conservatives', however, did not find any necessary connexion between 'political and social comfort' and religious reform. They were eager to separate their religion from secular activities. Radhakanta Deb agreed to work with the School Book Society, provided no 'religious matter' was introduced into their publications. No religious instruction was allowed in Hindu College; when Derozio was suspected of encouraging his students to question the authority of Hinduism, he had to resign. In 1824 the managers of the College were forced to seek financial help from the government, and had to agree to share its management with a government nominee. However, they reminded the General Committee of Public Instruction that the College 'is a Hindu institution for the purpose of cultivating especially English literature and science alone, that the admission of persons likely to injure respectability and consequently, to contract the utility of the College will always be strictly prohibited, and that works directed against the character and principles of our countrymen will be also excluded'. They protested against Bentinck's Regulation to abolish *sati*, for they considered such an act was a direct interference with Hindu religion and custom.

The 'conservatives' kept firm control over Hindu College. Baidyanath Mukherjee, the Secretary of the College, was originally a member of Rammohun's *Atmiya Sabha*, but he broke

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3 *Presidency College Register*, p. 6.
4 See the Petition of the Hindus against the abolition of *sati* (Regulation XVII of 1829) as reprinted in Ahmed, *Social ideas and social change in Bengal, 1818–1835*, pp. 176–9.
his connexions with the *Sabha* soon after Rammohun launched an open campaign against Hindu orthodoxy. Lakshminarayan Mukherjee, Baidyanath’s son, followed his father as the Secretary of the Hindu College, and he was a supporter of *Dharma Sabha* in 1830. Gopimohon Tagore and his sons Chandrakumar and Prasannakumar were the only supporters of Rammohun Roy to be connected with the management of the College. The ‘liberals’ were also in the minority on the committees of the School Book Society and the School Society; only Prasannakumar Tagore was associated with these societies. However, by 1832 the Committee of the School Book Society had included Dwarkanath Tagore and Radhaprasad Roy (son of Rammohun).¹

As we probe a little deeper we begin to realize the complexity of the situation. The caste analysis of the two contesting groups brings out an interesting pattern. Although Rammohun succeeded in bringing together men from all castes (there were *Kayasthas* like Kalinath Munshi, Brindaban Mitra, and Nandakisore Bose, and *Subarnavaniks* like Kasi Nath Mullick), most of his active supporters were Brahmins, *Radi Kulins*, like Kali Sankar Ghosal, Baidyanath Mukherjee, Ananda Banerjee, Braja Mohun Majumdar and Ramchandra Vidyabagis, or *Piralis* (*bhagna Kulin*), like the Tagores, Dwarkanath, his brothers and cousins, or *Barendra Kulins*, like Tarachand Chakrabarti.² The leading members of the *Dharma Sabha* group were non-Brahmins; only two out of thirteen committee members were Brahmins. The protectors of orthodox Brahmanism were *Maulik* (low grade) *Kayasthas* like the Debs, or *Subarnavaniks* like Motilal Seal or *Baidyas* like Ramkamal Sen.³

3 The following men were selected as the members of the *Dharma Sabha* Committee after the first meeting held at Calcutta Sanskrit College on 17 January 1830: Ramgopal Mallick, Gopimohon Deb, Radhakanta Deb, Tarinicharan Mitra, Ramkamal Sen, Harimohon Tagore, Kashinath Mallick, Maharaj Kalikrishna Bahadur, Ashutosh Sarkar, Gokolnath Mallick, Baisnavadas Mallick, Nilmani Dey and Bhavanicharan Banerjee (the Secretary); *Samachar Chandrika*, 23 Jan. 1830, *S.S.K.* Vol. 1, p. 301.
It is interesting to note that many writers, social reformers and politicians during the nineteenth century were Radi Kulin Brahmins. In fact four great Bengalis, Rammohun Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Sir Surendranath Banerjea, and Rangilal Banerjee, were descended from three branches of the same Bando-Ghoti family.\(^1\)

Benoy Ghosh attaches great significance to the fact that two great social reformers, Raja Rammohun Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, came from the Radi Kulin Brahmin caste. He argues that social reforms were inaugurated by the Radi Kulin Brahmins to safeguard their own interests. The strict laws of endogamy, the prohibition of the remarriage of widows, kulinism and polygamy left many women of this caste childless, consequently the caste was decreasing in number. The social reforms concerning sati, the remarriage of widows and polygamy aimed at increasing the birth rate.\(^2\) However, although it is generally acknowledged that the Radi Kulin Brahmins were numerically weak, there is no hard evidence to support Ghosh’s thesis.

It is more fruitful to look at the two contesting groups as two leading dals. Duls were social factions, formed under the leadership of a rich man, a dalapati. Although a member of any caste could aspire to be a dalapati, the majority of the dalapatis in Calcutta were either Brahmin or Kayastha. Most dals were multi-caste bodies; Baidyas, Kayasthas, Tilis, Kaibartyas, Sadgops, Weavers, Subarnavaniks and Brahmins could belong to the same dal and the Brahmins in many dals accepted the leadership of other castes. There were, however, some castes, like the Subarnavaniks, who had their own caste dal. Most Calcutta dalapatis had followers in the rural areas, in their zamindaris and their ancestral villages.\(^3\)

In the eighteenth century, all disputes concerning caste were

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decided at the *jatimala* or ‘caste-cutcheries’; it would seem that such ‘cutcheries’ had some formal recognition and two *dals*, one led by Nubkissen and the other by Madan Datta, competed with each other to get the leadership of Bengali Hindu society in Calcutta. As more rich Hindus moved into Calcutta during the latter part of the eighteenth century many new *dals* were formed. Since about the end of the eighteenth century all disputes concerning the caste rules on pollution, marriage, status within the *jatis* and sometimes even disputes over the inheritance of property, were settled at ‘courts’ held in *dalapatis’* houses. Dwijendranath Tagore recalled, in his *Memoirs*, the days when his grandfather Dwarkanath and his father Debendranath ‘ruled the society’ (*samaj sasan*) as *dalapatis* and settled many disputes between the members of the *dals* which would usually be decided, in the twentieth century, in a court of law.

In the absence of a church, or of even the caste *panchayats*, or chieftains’ or old *zamindars’* courts, the *dals* gave Hindu society in Bengal, as Ghosh put it, ‘its coherence, its submission to discipline, its recognition of leaders, its respect for tradition’. Even Dwijendranath Tagore, a *Brahmo* leader, praised the *dals*, for they curbed the ‘evils of individualism’ and provided the society with cohesion and authority, and through the *dals* the ‘traditional culture’ was able to continue despite the changes of the nineteenth century. The *dalapatis*, like the old rajas, patronized Brahmin pandits, and *ghataks* (match-makers), who debated on knotty problems of Hindu theology, wrote eulogies for their patrons, prepared ‘family histories’ (*Kula Panjikas*) and gave *vyavasthas* (decrees) on problems concerning caste rules and customary laws.

The activities of the *dals* were not devoid of politics. This was an area of power over which the British government had no control. While the British managed state affairs, the *dalapatis* ‘ruled the society’. The *dalapatis* had considerable authority and influence over men in Calcutta and in the rural areas where

some of the dals had links. The dalapatis enforced their vyavasthas on caste rules through the weapon of excommunication, and everyone feared excommunication. If a person were excommunicated, then he might not be able to marry his children off or obtain a priest to perform the family rites, he might not be invited to traditional social functions like sraddhas, pujas and marriages and his invitations for such occasions might not be accepted. So all bhadralok felt the necessity of belonging to a dal. If a person fell out with his dalapati, he could move to another dal or if he was rich enough and influential enough he could form his own dal, or live as an outcaste. The protection of a dal was essential; Nilmani Mullick, and his family, as dalapati ‘introduced several reforms amongst their kinsmen, and saved many from excommunication of caste or other social degradation'.1 Nabakrishna Sinha saved a Tili family from excommunication despite the opposition from the other members of his dal.2

Caste grades and ranks were also decided by the dals. Although theoretically the Bengali Hindu society was divided into two varnas and forty-one jatis, no jati in Bengal was a homogeneous group. Each jati was subdivided into numerous groups, with strict marriage laws and hierarchical orders within it. The Friend of India observed that in Bengal every caste was subdivided into numerous classes, each given a certain rank or status by tradition.

‘Hence the station of every individual in Bengal is settled with nearly as much precision as that of the nobility of Europe... No family is lost in the crowd; there are always some beneath it, who view its right and dignity with feelings of respect; every individual therefore possesses an acknowledged and defined rank in this mighty aristocracy. These family distinctions may be tarnished by ignoble alliances, but they may be regained by a series of advantageous marriages.’3

Thus marriage was an important area of human activity for men seeking higher rank. The ghatak played a key role in all

3 The Friend of India, Vol. 1, p. 84.
important marriage alliances, they compiled and interpreted the Kulapanjikas (marriage registers or family histories) and decided on the suitability of marriages. The dalapatis who patronized the compilers of the Kulapanjikas were able to improve their own status and exercise authority over men. Nubkissen, although a Maulik Kayastha, managed to marry his grandson to the daughter of the celebrated Goshtipati Gopikanta Sinha of Gopinagar through his ghataks, and thus 'constituted his grandson as the Thirteenth Goshtipati from Srimanta Raya'.

His descendants claimed, in the nineteenth century, the Kulin status. Tagores also had their own ghataks who wrote the 'family histories' of their patrons. The dalapatis also helped their castes to move up in the ritual ladder; thus the Baidyas were helped by Rajballabh and were already claiming the status of 'the twice born'. The Kayasthas soon followed them, and the Deb family and their dal played a prominent part in it. Many rich men of very low ritual status started claiming the Kayastha status. The rich cousins of Kabartya Rajendra Das were claiming such status in the 1830s but they could only be recognized as Kayasthas if their claim was supported by such a dalapati as Deb.

It was important for the bhadralok who wished to acquire authority and influence over men in Calcutta to be active in the dals. Thus the bhadralok who wanted to be a representative of 'native opinion' must be active in 'public welfare', in the colleges and societies; he should also be a dalapati or at least be a leading member of an influential dal in Calcutta. Through the dals, the leading men in Calcutta acquired high status and exercised considerable influence and authority over men in Calcutta and outside. In 1833, Ashutosh Dey, son of Ramdoolal, decided to break away from Madan Datta's dal and form his own dal. He was already an important figure in Calcutta; he was a son of the richest man in the city and a formidable businessman in his own right; he was active in the schools, in societies and a prominent

1 A rapid sketch of Raja Radhakanta Deb, p. 17.
member of the *Dharma Sabha* Committee. However, he still felt the need to have a *dal* of his own, which no doubt gave him even higher status than he already had and he exercised even more influence over men of all castes in Calcutta and outside, who accepted him as their leader.\(^1\)

The traditional style of politics was largely concerned with caste status. It meant competition among the elites of Calcutta to gain status and power through the *dals*. There were many *dals* in Calcutta, but during our period some *dals* were more important than others. It seems that there were at least two leading *dals*; that of the Tagores and that of the Debs. It must be noted, however, that the Tagores were not united; Harimohon Tagore and Ladlimohon Tagore, step-brothers of Gopimohon Tagore and Umananda Tagore, another member of the Patheriaghata branch of the family, were in Deb's *dal* and were active in the *Dharma Sabha*.\(^2\) The Debs managed to bring together many *dalapatis* under their leadership in the *Dharma Sabha*, and a large majority of these *dalapatis* were non-Brahmins. Dwarkanath Tagore also succeeded in gaining the support of many *dalapatis* like Kalinath Munshi of Taki and individuals for Rammohun’s *Brahmo Samaj*. Many contemporaries considered *Brahmo Samaj* and *Dharma Sabha* as two rival *dals*.\(^3\) In fact they were two rival groups, each an amalgam of many *dals* contesting for status and power.

The activities of Rammohun Roy, who was a newcomer to Calcutta, who had no *dal* of his own and who insisted on conducting politics solely in the modern idiom, threatened, at least for a time, the power of the *dals*. The young students of the Hindu College, who ate beef and drank wine also defied the authority of the *dals*. But even Rammohun had to enlist the support of some of the established families like the Tagores and had to patronize the Brahmins, both through his *Brahmo Samaj*

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and through his Vedanta College. It is also doubtfull whether the Young Bengal would have been able to defy authority had they not had the indulgence of some of their elders, especially of Prasannakumar Tagore who sat on the Committee of Managers during the troubled years.

The successful leading men had to master the two languages of politics. They had to learn to bargain with their masters for a better deal for their class and compete with each other to gain control of areas of power open to them. Yet at another level they fought each other as dals to gain high status and power over men. What is, however, more significant, the shrewd bhadrak was able to use the modern media of communication, like the press, to extend the authority of the dals and use the authority and the contacts of the dalapatis to strengthen the position of a modern association like the Dharma Sabha.

On 17 January, 1830 the ‘conservatives’ formed the Dharma Sabha to agitate against Regulation XVII of 1829, which prohibited the practice of sati. This was at once a modern association and an amalgam of traditional dals. It worked as a modern association should, with a programme of action, a committee with a president, a treasurer and a secretary, and a set of rules which delimited the power of the committee. The secretary meticulously kept a book of minutes and an account of its funds. They opened ‘branch’ sabhas in Dacca, Murshidabad, Santipur, Benaras, Cuttak and in Bhawanipur. The bhadrak, the zamin-dars, lawyers, taksildars, Brahmans, Baidyas, Kayasthas and others of the mofussil towns joined these ‘branch sabhas’, collected signatures for the petition against Bentinck’s Regulation, got the local pandits to write vyavasthas in support of sati and collected subscriptions for the Calcutta Dharma Sabha. They appointed agents in England to lobby for their cause. But the

1 Collet. The life and letters of Raja Rammohun Roy, pp. 189—92.
2 Daladal (feuds among dals) was a part of the abhijat bhadrak’s life in Calcutta throughout the nineteenth century. See Dwijendranath Thakurer smritikatha, pp. 285—6.
Sabha also worked as a dal, a ‘caste tribunal’, what George Johnson called the ‘black tribunal’.¹ The Sabha gave vyavasthas on caste rules, marriage and inheritance; and imposed their will by the threat of excommunication. The pages of Samachar Chandrika are full of references to such disputes on which the Pandits of Dharma Sabha gave their vyavastha. They decided, for instance, whether or not the second brother of a certain Navakumar Mukherjee of Jahanabad had forfeited his right to inherit ancestral property since he had been living with a chandal (untouchable) woman, or whether a Shudra could act as a guru of a Brahmin. The Sabha also tried to excommunicate the satidvesis (the abolitionists).²

The success of the Dharma Sabha as the first Calcutta society to mobilize men in and outside Calcutta to resist a government measure, is rather startling. Within the first five months of its existence the Sabha was able to establish most of its ‘branches’ and the organizers had already collected 1,146 signatures protesting against the abolition of sati, by 14 January 1830, three days before the formal launching of the Sabha.³ The petition did not move Bentinck and the appeal was dismissed by the Privy Council.⁴ However, the organizational experience was very valuable to the bhadralok. In the Dharma Sabha and in the agitation for sati the bhadralok learnt the techniques of using the traditional channels like the dals to mobilize men for modern agitational movements. The energy that was generated by such activities in the Calcutta bhadralok could well be used for agitation for their political and economic advancement. After

2 Samachar Chandrika. 5 July 1830 and 12 Oct. 1832 Cf Alexander’s East India Magazine, Vol. I, pp 403–4. It was becoming increasingly difficult to impose the sanctions. In the case of Navakumar Mukherjee’s brother, the Dharma Sabha decreed that a man ‘who is given up to licentious pleasures’ must not be allowed to inherit his father’s estate. But they had no way to impose their sanction since the English courts would not recognize such a sanction. If, however, they had a powerful local dal they imposed strict excommunication.
1832, when the Privy Council rejected the appeal from the 'conservatives', the 'Dharma Sabha' ceased to function as a modern society for social reform and agitation and became a mere 'caste tribunal'. However, the leading members of Dharma Sabha, Ramkamal Sen, Maharaja Kali Krishna Bahadur and Radhakanta Deb, were able to use their organizational experience and to canalize the energy of their members to a secular cause. It was the dalapatis of Dharma Sabha who led the other bhadralk, the Muslim zamindars and the European free traders in founding the first political association in India in 1838.

Economic and political interests had brought all bhadralk together to organize protest meetings and sign petitions from time to time. In 1826 it was against the the Jury Act, in 1827 against the stamp duties, in 1828 against the resumption of la-iki-raj land and again in 1835 for the free press. But they had no secular political society to organize movements to further their cause. In 1833 it was suggested in a Bengali pamphlet issued by The Reformer, a liberal newspaper, that the Bengali zamindars should have such a society, but nothing came of it. A similar attempt by Roy Kalinath Chaudhuri and Ramlochan Ghosh and some members of the Brahma Samaj also failed. Their society, Bangabhasa Prakasika Sabha, founded in December 1836, became a defunct body by January 1837.

The first serious step towards the formation of a political association was taken in 1836, in the Dharma Sabha. It was conceived by H. H. Wilson, who put his ideas to Ramkamal Sen. Sen proposed at a meeting of the Dharma Sabha on 23 April 1836, that 'a branch society should be immediately formed, where matters affecting the public welfare such as zamindaris

2 The Requisition for the meeting in the Calcutta Town Hall to protest against the Stamp Duty was signed by both Rammohun Roy and Radhakanta Deb. The meeting, however, was not allowed by the Sheriff of Calcutta and the organizer held the meeting at Calcutta Exchange Room. Samachar Darpan. 12 and 19 May 1827, S.S K. Vol. 1, pp. 198–200.
and agricultural disquisitions should be treated of, [sic] instead of those limited dull questions, which now occupy the society's attention'. This was approved by the president Maharaja Kali-Krishna Bahadur, but was opposed by Bhavanicharan Banerjee, who saw a threat to orthodox religion in the formation of a secular sabha. Banerjee was cut-voted and it was agreed that a special meeting should be held 'to consider the expediency of establishing a branch society for the purpose suggested'.

There was, however, no special meeting of the Dharma Sabha to discuss the proposal, at least not in public. Instead, Ramkamal Sen and other leading members of the Dharma Sabha called a meeting of all the zamindars in Calcutta, in November 1837 at Hindu College, to consider the expediency of forming a society to protect landed property in Bengal. The meeting was attended by the 'liberals' as well as by the 'conservatives', and it was decided to form a committee, which consisted of Radhakanta Deb, Ramkamal Sen, Bhavanicharan Mitra (all connected with the Dharma Sabha) and Prasannakumar Tagore, to write a manifesto and the rules and regulations for the proposed society.

In March 1838 the committee put its proposal to a large audience consisting of all leading abhijat bhadralok of Calcutta, Muslim zamindars like Munshi Muhammad Amir, Europeans like Prinsep, Hare and Dickens. The meeting decided to form the Landholders' Society, primarily to defend private property in land, and to achieve the extension of the Permanent Settlement to North-Western Province, repeal Regulation XII of 1828 and improve the position of the zamindars. All landholders, irrespective of caste, creed and colour, were allowed to join the Society, provided they paid Rs. 5 as admission fee and Rs. 20 as the yearly subscription. The meeting appointed the first committee of the Society, which consisted of 'liberals' like Dwarkanath Tagore, Prasannakumar Tagore, 'conservatives' like Ramkamal Sen and Radhakanta Deb, one Muslim zamindar, Munshi Muhammad Amir, and free traders like George Prinsep. It is

significant to note that five out of the twelve members of the Committee were from the *Dharma Sabha*.¹

The Society was never big (it is doubtful whether the membership was ever more than two hundred)² and it became a defunct body by the end of the 1840s. Nevertheless, it can claim to be the parent of all subsequent political associations in India in the nineteenth century. Its organization and its techniques of agitation were used by loyal Indian subjects, in the British-India Association, in the Indian Association and even in the Indian National Congress. They all wanted to work within the British-India system, had faith in British justice, wanted to create a pressure of public opinion in Britain and in India on the British government to make political concession to the Indians. The Landholders' Society, although formed primarily to protect the interest of the landholders, had wider political implications. It was interested in preventing the resumption of rent-free tenure, and in extending the Permanent Settlement to North-Western Province, and also in reforming the police system, and the Revenue and Judicial Department, in the free use of capital in Indian agriculture and in the humane treatment of the Indian coolies in Mauritius. It opened branches in various parts of the Provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, and appointed John Crawford as a regular agent in London.³

In the preceding pages I have argued that the economic and administrative changes in Bengal brought about a social erosion. The most significant change took place in Calcutta, which witnessed the rise of a new urban class. The economic and political interests of this class forced the *bhadralok* into agitational movements and finally in 1838 they formed the first political association in India, not only to protect the landed interest but also to press for the political and economic advancement of the class. Men with economic power and high status formed the elite of

   The five *Dharma Sabha* members were Raja Rajnarayan Bahadur, Roy Kalikrishna Bahadur, Radhakanta Deb, Asutosh Dey and Ramkamal Sen.

2 Ninety-four zamindars joined the Society after the first meeting, four of whom were Muslims. See *The Landholders' Society*, p. 33.

this class (the *dalapatis*). But since status was still attached to caste, men seeking higher status had to work through the traditional *dals*. The *dalapatis* also used the *dals* for modern politics, for both horizontal and vertical mobilization, to establish contacts in the *mofussil* areas and to exert pressure on their followers for agitation. But if politics were conducted through traditional channels it was the end of the caste 'tradition' and status society and the beginning of a market and competitive society.