INTRODUCTION

The articles included in the present volume were written between 1972 and 1981. "Rammohun Roy and the Breach with the Past" was presented at a Nehru Memorial Museum and Library Seminar in 1972 and published in V. C. Joshi, ed., Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India (New Delhi, 1975). "The Complexities of Young Bengal", presented to the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (Calcutta) in 1973, came out in Nineteenth Century Studies (October, 1973). "The Radicalism of Intellectuals" is being reprinted from Calcutta Historical Review (II, July-Dec. 1977). "Primitive Rebellion and Modern Nationalism" was presented to the Bhubaneswar session of the Indian National Congress (1977), and published in K. N. Panikkar (ed.), National and Left Movements in India (Vikas, 1980). "Logic of Gandhian Nationalism" and "Popular Movements, National Leadership and the Coming of Freedom with Partition, 1945-47" were presented at seminars in Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in 1976 and 1980. They are being reprinted from Indian Historical Review (III, July, 1976) and Economic and Political Weekly (Annual Number, 1982). The two other articles are being published here for the first time. "Some Reflections on the Pattern and Structure of Early Nationalist Activity" was prepared for the International Congress of Historians held at San Francisco in August 1975; it could not be presented because the Government of India in the wake of the Emergency excluded some of us from the official delegation, an honour which I am happy to share with Irfan Habib. "The Women's Question" was a brief intervention at a UGC-sponsored seminar at Indraprastha College for Women (Delhi) in 1981.

Going through what one has written in the past is a salutary experience for an author: so much seems jejune and inadequate, so many ideas have been modified. Thorough-going revision however would have meant a new series of papers, some of them on themes far from my present research interests. I have therefore agreed, after much hesitation, to reprint those articles without change, bowing, only half convinced, to the argument of my friends running Papyrus that the papers might still be of some interest or use to students and general readers. I would like, however, to clarify briefly the context in which the articles were first written, and the kind of rethinking which makes many of them seem incomplete to me today.

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The essays on the 19th century Bengali ‘middle class’ or ‘bhadralok’ cultural history (Nos. 1, 2, 4, 5) form part of a critique of the dominant historiographical model of a ‘Bengal Renaissance’, inferior no doubt to its Italian prototype, but still allegedly constituting a transition from medieval to modern in India under British rule roughly parallel to the classic break-through in Western Europe. Within the same framework, efforts were often made to establish straight-line connections between particular aspects or movements of the past and present-day tendencies (e.g. the rationalism, international concerns and sympathy for the peasantry of Rammohun; the daring iconoclasm of Young Bengal; the reform attempts of Vidyasagar and the Brahmos; or, in an alternative version, the proto-nationalism of the Dharma Sabha or of later revivalist groups). Such historiographical traditions also generally assumed clear-cut divisions between reformers and revivalists, modernizers and defenders of tradition. Along with friends like Asok Sen, Barun De and Dipesh Chakrabarti, I had become deeply unhappy with such ‘Whig’ interpretations of the 19th century heritage, and tried to grope towards an alternative framework which would focus on complexities and contradictions, reject unilinear interpretations, and emphasize the decisive and specific logic of the colonial situation. This was seen as setting limits, distorting superficially ‘modernist’ aims and constituting an environment fundamentally different from the early modern European transition to bourgeois society and culture.

The context for the papers on the national movement (Nos. 3, 6, 7, 8) was set by the challenge posed by the Cambridge school focus on elite aspirations and/or factional squabbles to earlier ways of looking at the history of the freedom struggle. I felt, and still do feel, that the response to what was often considered to be a kind of neo-imperialist onslaught could not be a simple return to conventional nationalist (or at times even Marxist) approaches which were in their own way almost as ‘elitist’, looking at things from the top, in terms of mobilization by great leaders or patriotic ideologies. What was required, rather, was a move towards a ‘history from below’, which could reveal the relative autonomy of mass actions and the vital significance of the latter at crucial moments of historical development. In recent years, such modes of thinking and research have been carried much further, and made more self-aware, by the ‘subaltern studies’ trend.
But, as Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* has brought home to us with all its provocative brilliance, the discovery of popular autonomy is only a first step towards the much more difficult but vital enterprise of seeking to explore popular consciousness. The intellectual history of the literati of the 19th century Bengal similarly requires for its real rejuvenation explorations of varied autonomous but inter-related labels of consciousness both ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ to use the convenient though question-begging labels. Above all, both areas of research demand major refinements of method, the development of fruitful dialogues between history and related disciplines like anthropology, the use (with discrimination and not just as a fashion) of new method of linguistic or semiological analysis of texts, as well as much more serious efforts to understand predominantly religious modes of thought and sensibility than have been common among historians of modern India to date. What is needed, in other words, is a break-through towards social history on the genuine sense of that much abused word, in the context of the 19th century Bengali intelligentsia or of the national movement, without such a break there is an ever-present tendency to get sucked back into the whirlpools of ultimately sterile debates, in which efforts at reassessing Rammohun or Young Bengal, Vidyasagar or the Brahmos come to be greeted or condemned as mere debunking exercises, and the history of nationalism degenerates into an endless spontaneity/leadership debate. Gandhi as great man versus Gandhi the great betrayer.

In my more recent work—an essay on the nature and conditions of subaltern militancy in Bengal between 1905-22 and published, last year, and a full-length analysis of the *Ramkrishna-kathamrita* as a historical text which is still in progress—I have been trying to move towards a break of this type. The essays included in this volume fall considerably short of such an ideal. Nor, do they amount to a “Critique of Colonial India”, a sub-title which has inadvertently crept in due to my unpardonable delay in suggesting an appropriate name for the volume. I can only hope that the articles will somehow endure the strain of republication wants and all.

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