“Selecting the major theme for your first work of scholarship is like selecting a wife,” Stephen N. Hay once cautioned me while I was under his guidance at the University of Chicago. He added, “in either case, the better the choice, the more enduring and fruitful the relationship.” As early as 1958, while still a graduate student at Chicago, I had made my choice, and the results of the first nine years of “marriage” with the Bengal renaissance are contained in the pages of this book.

In retrospect, I should say that I chose the topic because I believed that an exhaustive treatment of it, with reasonable objectivity, would at least partly answer two central questions in modern Indian history. As a rule, the Indian renaissance of the nineteenth century is treated within the context of cultural continuity and change under British colonialism. Therefore, the historiography of that renaissance is divided between the advocates of British “impact” and the advocates of Indian “response.” If British influence is considered paramount, then the writer stresses change and regards the renaissance as a form of Westernization or modernization. If, on the other hand, Indian response is stressed, then the focus is on the Indian heritage, and the renaissance is viewed as a reinterpretation of tradition. Not infrequently, scholars have looked upon the phenomenon as a synthesis between “East and West.”

If a study of the Bengal renaissance should tell us something vital about the continuing problem of tradition versus modernity in India, it should also reveal to us something equally significant about the origins of nationalism there. Indeed, as several writers have intimated, renaissance and nationalism are so closely related in India that it is often difficult to distinguish one from the other. For example, do we characterize the new sense of community (in Hindu India) based on language, religion, customs, manners, literature, and
history as renaissance or as nationalism? Is renaissance simply a
misnomer for the prepoliticized stage of cultural nationalism? Fi-
nally, just as in the case of renaissance and cultural change, we are
compelled to raise the complex question of the relationship between
nationalism and modernity. Which is the more fitting framework
for such analysis: Westernization or the reinterpretation of tradi-
tion?

It was thanks to many individuals at the University of Chicago
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David Kopf