Religious Thought of Rammohun Roy

The purpose of this essay is an analysis of the religious thinking of Rammohun Roy, indubitably a landmark in the cultural history of modern Bengal. For considerations of space at least two important connected problems have to be left out—Rammohun’s relation to earlier theistic speculations and contemporary popular religious practices on the one hand, and on the other his impact on his followers and the moral intellectual life of his country in general.

The material for this article is drawn entirely from Rammohun’s English works. He wrote extensively in Bengali, shaping his own language into a vehicle of serious prose. But it was also his practice to supply his own English versions for a wider public as he went ahead. These constitute a veritable treasury of rich thought with which we are not familiar today. They deserve extensive quotation for their wealth of reflection, close argument and felicity in expression.

First Formulations

The first significant religious pronouncement of Rammohun Roy was in the *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin* (c. 1804), with a Persian text and an Arabic introduction. An English translation (by a Muslim scholar) appeared only in 1884. In this pamphlet, Rammohun appears as a pure deist and a rationalist with a certain limitation.

The introduction begins with the assertion that there is a universal belief in “the existence of one being who is the source of creation and the governor of it”, but there is no agreement between particular religious creeds. The former is indeed like “a natural tendency”, while a creed is only “an excrescent quality grown . . . by habit and training.” It is logically impossible for the conflicting creeds to be all true. Imputing truth to one of them will be a case of “giving preference without there being any reason for it”. Hence the conclusion must be drawn that “falsehood is common to all religions.”
The text of the booklet is a frontal attack on all sectarians. To the simple natural faith in the existence of a supreme being have been added “hundreds of useless hardships and privations regarding eating and drinking, purity and impurity, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, etc.” which are merely “causes of injury and detrimental to social life.” Again, “everyone in imitation of the individuals of the nation among whom he has been brought up professes the existence of a particular divinity.” Mujtahids (religious expounders) “invent” dogmas of faith; support these by supernatural theories “which are full of impossibilities”; advance apparently reasonable arguments “which are evidently nonsensical and absurd.” “None of them can refute the dogmas of others in this life . . . all of them are living here equally enjoying the external blessings of nature.”

Sectarian arguments are knocked out one by one. It has been claimed that miracles are possible for the almighty. But the creator will certainly not “create impossible things”; why should we believe in things which are “inconsistent with the laws of perception?” It has been insinuated that even if a religion is false, there can be no harm in believing in it. But what is “remote from reason and repugnant to experience” is unworthy of a sensible man; it is even likely to promote mischiefs and immoral practices. It is believed that the rejection of traditional religion is an “insult of our forefathers”. But man, not being an animal, “should exercise his own intellectual powers” given by god himself. It is held that one should not go against the faith of his community. But the appeal to majority is “a blow to all . . . religion”, for every religion is a minority at first.

In the pages of the Tuhfat, Rammohun’s deism shines out brightly, shorn of all sectarian beliefs, with a constant appeal to reason, man’s “innate faculty”. But the rationalism of course is not unqualified. The universality of belief in one being is no certain proof of its truth; Rammohun himself in another context admitted that “the truth of a saying does not depend on the multiplicity of the sayers.” He also remarked that the belief in the existence of the soul and the next world (“the foundation of religions”) is “for the sake of the welfare of the people”, “although the real existence of soul and the next world is hidden and mysterious”. He did not dwell on the theory of creation out of nothing. What he emphasised is the natural belief in “the one being who is the fountain of the harmonious organisation of the universe” — the familiar argument of pattern. Basically this is faith rather than reason. The acute criticism of Hume against theism itself,
for example in the dialogue between Cleanthes and Philo, which Ram-
mohun’s younger contemporary Derozio taught his students at the Hindu
College, would have left Rammohun cold.

It is significant that Rammohun did not bring out an English version
of the Tuhfat. Was the early rationalism too much for his audience and
himself? The Brahmo Samaj has also not used it overmuch. Miss Collet
considered it immature, though Brajendranath Seal thought otherwise.

NATURE OF THE SUPREME BEING

Men have a natural belief in a supreme being who however cannot
be exactly defined. He is “out of the reach of comprehension and
beyond all description.” (Ishopanishad, Preface.) “No language can
describe him, no intellectual powers can compass or determine him.
We know nothing of how the Supreme Being should be explained.”
(Kena Upanishad.) He is “the eternal unsearchable immutable being
who is the author and preserver of the universe.” (Trust Deed of
Brahmo Samaj.)

The unknowability of god is not carried by Rammohun to the pure
logic of agnosticism. 1 Our ignorance of the nature of the supreme being,
he argues in the A Second Defence of Monotheistic System, does not
mean that we are equally ignorant as to his existence. “Many things
that far surpass the limits of our senses to perceive, or experience to
teach, may yet be rendered credible, or even demonstrated by infer-
ences drawn from our experiences.” (Ibid.), as in the case of gravita-
tion. In the Religious Instructions he remarks that when we hold god
to be imperceptible and undefinable, we mean “his likeness cannot be
conceived”; and when we state that he is capable of being known,
“his mere existence is referred to, that there is a god, as the indescrib-
able creation and government of this universe clearly demonstrate”.
We acquire a notion of the superintending power solely through “obser-
vation of material phenomena.” (Tract on the Divine Worship.) The
knowledge of god in an exact sense is “difficult, or rather impossible”;
“but to read the existence of the almighty being in his works of nature,
is not, I will dare to say, so difficult to the mind of a man possessed
of commonsense, and unfettered by prejudice.” (A Defence of Hindu
Theism.)

In the Tuhfat, verses and phrases from the Koran were quoted,
though only in passing. Twelve years later, Rammohun found a firm
footing in the Hindu Vedanta with Sankara’s interpretation, in the
light of his own understanding of course. In the introduction to the Hindu Theism he declared “the doctrines of the unity of god are real Hindooism, as that religion was practised by our ancestors.” In the Abridgement of Vedanta he quoted Vyasa, who “explained the supreme being by his effects and works, without attempting to define his essence”, as we explain the sun by its consequences. From “the multifarious, wonderful universe”, “we naturally infer the existence of a being, who regulates the whole”, as from a pot we infer the artificer.

The argument from pattern is of course open to serious logical scientific criticism. But Rammohun stuck firmly to it. Atoms etc. cannot be the independent cause of the world; “no being void of understanding can be the author of a system so skilfully arranged.” (Ibid.) The wonderful structure and growth of even so trifling an object as a leaf of tree affords proof of a superintending power. (Monotheistical System.) “Body is as infinite as space . . . the power that guides its members must be internal.” (Divine Worship.) “The regular, wise and wonderful combinations and arrangements” of surrounding objects “lead an unbiased mind to a notion of a supreme existence.” (Collected Translations, Introduction.)

From the first step asserting god’s existence, it is not difficult to arrive at certain formulations about the nature of the supreme being, in spite of the proclamation of its unknowability. “God is indeed one and has no second.” (Abridgement of Vedanta.) “The sole regulator of the universe is but one, who is omnipresent.” (Ishopanishad, Preface.) “As the universe is infinite in extent, and is arranged with infinite skill, the soul by which it is animated must be infinite in every perfection.” (Divine Worship.) Nature is “subordinate to and dependent on the perceiving spirit.” (The Brahmanical Magazine, 1.) It is however admitted that attributes held excellent among men, “as truth, mercy, justice, etc.” are often ascribed to god as an adaptation to “the understanding of beginners in the study of theology.” (Ibid., IV.) Rammohun did not cling to strictest monism, or to an unqualified doctrine of unknowability of the godhead.

FIGHT AGAINST IDOLATRY

Rammohun’s views on the nature of the supreme being are not unacceptable to other religions. What marked him out was rather his uncompromising rejection of idol-worship in any form. He did not confine himself to an abstract intellectual philosophy, but declared war
on popular religious practices and ritual. It was this which earned for him the hostility of his countrymen, bitterness and persecution. But he was not a man to shrink from his chosen path of duty.

Categorically he asserted that in worship “all that bear figure and appellation are inventions.” (Ishophonishad, Preface.) He quoted from the Brihadaranyaka—“adore god alone”. By admitting other divinities the positive Vedic teachings “become false and absurd.” (Abridgement of Vedanta.) He denied that ceremonies and rites are necessary to true religion. (Hindu Theism.) “There can obviously be no inducement for an omnipotent being . . . to assume a form”; any representation of him is “impossible for a man, who has a becoming idea of god’s superiority.” (Monotheistical System.)

The worship of figured beings indicated in the sastras “is only applicable to those who are incapable of elevating their minds”, “for the benefit of those who are not possessed of sufficient understanding.” (Ishophonishad, Preface.) Such sastric injunctions are “merely a concession to the limited faculties; and not meant for ‘a wise man’.” (Monotheistic System.) Recourse to visible objects for worship is a “puerile practice.” (Hindu Theism.) Only “complete fools” believe in the beneficial necessity of rites and sacrifices (Mundaka Upanishad); “a fool . . . accepts the offer of rites.” (Kathophonishad.) Other uncomplimentary terms follow—idol-worship is meant for “persons of mean capacity”; (Collected Translations, Introduction;) “persons of feeble intellect”, “weak and ignorant persons”; (The Brahmanical Magazine, II;) “those (for example, idiots) who are unfortunately incapable of adoring the invisible supreme being.” (Ibid., IV.) No wonder that people were furious with Rammohun. Sensibilities were not limited to academic speculation could not keep quiet.

Rammohun however admitted that idol-worship “is not absolutely useless”; (Different Modes of Worship;) it is preferable to allowing people sinking to sheer idleness and sloth. (The Brahmanical Magazine, IV.) But he had no patience with the sophisticated defence of the worship of images. One by one he demolished the varieties of such intellectual defence for practices intrinsically unworthy of men; his Preface to the Ishophonishad concentrated on this task.

If it is argued that to attain a knowledge of the supreme being is impossible, why did the sastras instruct mankind “to aim at such attainment”? If it is held that the acquisition of the knowledge of god is difficult, “we ought therefore the more exert ourselves to acquire:
that knowledge.” To the argument that the worship of one god is for yatis or ascetics alone, Rammohun quoted Yajnavalkya that a householder also is required to perform such worship. Well-meaning Europeans have argued that idols are mere instruments to elevate our minds to god; Rammohun retorted that in actual fact the Hindus believe in the “independent existence of the objects of their idolatry as deities”, ascribing to them particular locations and modes of life, endowing an image with animation through the ceremony of the “pranapratistha”. It is said that all existence is god, and since the worship of everything is impossible, there can be no harm in adoring selected existences; Rammohun’s reply is that in worshipping a few things, the omnipresent divinity is not recognised, and after all god is “quite different from what we see or feel.” To the claim that the idol-worship purifies the mind, the answer is that purity of mind cannot be the consequence of any superstitious practice. The justification by long custom is met with the formulation that custom, “the fruit of vulgar caprice”, is quite different from true faith, based on “spiritual authorities and correct reasoning”; moreover, custom is variable, people recently have repeatedly turned to new practices “to promote their worldly advantage.” The Hindu Theism also pointed out that Hindus worship their deities not as “ministers” of god, but as “independent gods”, each claiming worship “on his own account”. Idol-worship, permitted only to the ignorant, has in effect led to a total neglect of the one god. (Monotheistical System.)

Idolatry is no mere intellectual error, it carries with it evil consequences. Rammohun quoted from the Kularnava in his Monotheistical System: “those who believe that the divine nature exists in any image . . . reap only distress by their austerities.” “Idolatrous rites can never be productive of eternal beatitude”—being meant only for the unperspicuous. (Mundaka Upanishad, Introduction.) Human proneness to idol-worship promotes “vain fancies”; that is why precautions must be taken against “framing a deity after human imagination.” (Collected Translations, Introduction.) Otherwise, we are landed in absurdities which have “destroyed every mark of reason, and darkened every beam of understanding.” (Kena Upanishad, Introduction.)

More mundane evils have also flowed in consequence of the slackening of true religion under the stress of image-worship. The Monotheistical System in a passage listed some of the evils resulting from the turning away from higher Vedantic teaching—forcible widow-burning; sale of girls in marriage; polygamy; kulinism. The caste system
also is connected with the decay.) It is a source of disunity; (The Brahmanical Magazine, I;) it has deprived the Hindus of “patriotic feeling”. (Private letter of 18 January 1828.) Rammohun thought that our social evils reflect the results of our loss of grip over higher religion. Ceremonies “instituted under the pretext of honouring the all-perfect author of nature are of a tendency utterly subversive of every moral principle.” (Hindu Theism.) If we begin to slip from the correct path we tend to slide down.

The main responsibility for this sorry state of things is by Rammohun placed squarely on the priesthood. Indeed it was here that he came nearest to the Lutheran reformation. The indictment is severe enough. “Many learned Brahmans are perfectly aware of the absurdity of idolatry . . . But as in the rites, ceremonics and festivals of idolatry, they find the source of their comforts and fortune, they not only never fail to protect idol-worship from all attack, but even advance and encourage it.” Again, the Brahmans “concealing your scriptures from you, continually teach you thus — believe whatever we may say — don’t examine or even touch your scriptures, neglect entirely your reasoning faculties . . . propitiate us by sacrificing to us the greater part (if not the whole) of your property.” (Ishopanishad, Preface.) “The Brahmans permitting themselves alone to interpret . . . the Vedanta”, it is “little known to the public; and the practice of few Hindoos indeed bears the least accordance with its precepts.” And, the Brahmans are people “whose prejudices are strong, and whose temporal advantage depends upon the present system.” (Abridgement of Vedanta, Introduction.) The Brahmanical teachers are actuated by “selfishness”, and “deriving pecuniary and other advantages from the numerous rites and festivals of idol-worship, constantly advance and encourage idolatry.” (Hindu Theism, Introduction.) “The system of dreaming, recommended by the learned Brahman, however essential to the interests of himself and his caste”, can bring no advantage. (Monotheistical System.) And finally, “the self-interested motives of their pretended guides have rendered the generality of the Hindoo community (in defiance of their sacred books) devoted to idol-worship — the source of prejudice and superstition and of the total destruction of moral principle.” (Mundaka Upanishad, Introduction.)

The Reformation is also recalled by Rammohun’s spirited defence of vernacular versions of holy books, blocked by the priests. “I have not yet met with any text of any Puranas which prohibit the explanation of the scripture in vulgar tongue.” (Hindu Theism, Introduction.)
Behind Rammohun’s militant anger against idolatry, there was a compassion for his countrymen which wins the heart. “A feeling for the misery and distress of his fellow creatures is, to everyone not overpowered by selfish motives, I presume, rather natural than optional. Secondly, I, as one of their countrymen, and ranked in the most religious sect, of course participate in the disgrace and ridicule to which they have subjected themselves.” (*Monotheistical System.*) “I born a Brahman have exposed myself to the complaining and reproaches even of some of my relations.” (*Abridgement of Vedanta, Introduction.*) “I have never ceased to contemplate with the strongest feelings of regret, the obstinate adherence of my countrymen to the fatal system of idolatry.” (*Ishopanishad, Introduction.*) Rammohun was not a missionary from outside; he spoke to his own countrymen as one of themselves. They however did not reciprocate his sentiment.

**TRUE WORSHIP**

Theological speculation was nothing new in our country, nor was intellectual dissent a novelty. What characterises Rammohun was his attempt, in addition, to devise a pure form of divine worship negating all kinds of popular image-worship and ceremonial. Monotheistical cults or sects had also appeared before in plenty. They were however rooted “in the emotion of bhakti” and not drawn straight from philosophical analysis. The true worship promulgated by Rammohun has therefore a ring of modernity in it and it may not be fanciful to trace in it a stamp of westernism. There is in his religious stand a distinctive effort to eliminate the traditional gulf between lofty speculation for the elite and the unthinking rites for the multitude.

Step by step we find unfolding Rammohun’s scheme of offering prayers directly to the one god. “The sole regulator of the universe is but one . . . whose worship is the chief duty of mankind.” (*Ishopanishad, Preface.*) Man shall direct his worship to the god “who, by residing in the heart, dwells in all living creatures.” (*Different Modes of Worship*), “but not under or by any other name.” (*Trust Deed.*)

“There is no need to attend to ceremonies prescribed by sastras — no want of a fan should be felt, when a soft southern wind is found to refresh.” (*Ishopanishad, Preface.*) “Man may acquire the true knowledge of god, even without absorbing the rules and rites prescribed by the Veda.”(*Hindu Theism, Introduction.*) “The illustrious Sankaracharya declared . . . the adoration of the supreme being, to be
entirely independent of Brahmanical ceremonies." (Monotheistical System.) "The great Vyasa . . . justifies the attainment of the knowledge of god, even by those who never practise the prescribed duties and rites." (An Apology for the Pursuit of Final Beatitude.)

Positively the essence of the new worship was the attempt to approach god directly, for "he who seeks to obtain a knowledge of god is gifted with it, god rendering himself conspicuous to him." (Mundaka Upanishad.) The actual mode of worship is thus defined: "To god we should approach, of him we should hear, of him we should think, and to him we should attempt to approximate." (Abridgement of Vedanta.) "Worship implies the act of one with a view to please another; but when applied to the supreme being, it signifies a contemplation of his attributes." (Religious Instruction.) The Trust Deed defines the process thus: "promotion of the contemplation of the author and preserver of the universe." To the perhaps natural objection that what cannot be conceived cannot be worshipped, the reply is given: "But should adoration imply only the elevation of the mind to the conviction of the existence of the omnipresent deity . . . and continual contemplation of his power . . . together with a constant sense of the gratitude which we naturally owe him for our existence, sensation, and comfort . . . I will never hesitate to assert, that his adoration is not only possible, and practicable, but even incumbent upon every rational creature." (Monotheistical System.) Brahmo prayers even today try to follow this pattern, faithfully on the whole, though imagination is often allowed to go far beyond the formula.

Adoration has its consequences. "A command over our passions and over the external senses of the body and good acts are . . . indispensable in the mind's approximation to god." (Abridgement of Vedanta.) "Moral principle is a part of the adoration of god . . . and good acts are . . . indispensable in the mind's approximation to god." (Monotheistical System.) "The true system of religion . . . leads its observers to a knowledge and love of god, and to a friendly indication towards their fellow creatures, impressing their hearts at the same time with humility and charity, accompanied by independence of mind and pure sincerity." (Kathopanishad, Introduction.) The Trust Deed refers to "promotion of charity, morality, piety, benevolence, virtue and the strengthening of the bonds of union between men of all religions, persuasions and creeds." The Brahmanical Magazine, IV, notes — "the divine homage, which we offer, consists solely in the practice of daya or benevolence towards each other, and not in a fanciful faith or in
certain motions of the feet, legs, arms, heads, tongue, or other bodily organs.”

Rammohun’s mode of worship has two marks of possible westernism, congregational prayers and hymn singing. His long association with the unitarians must have developed the congregational idea which from the first marked Brahmo meetings. The introduction of monotheistic songs was defended in the Hindu Theism (Introduction) on the authority of Yajnavalkya and the comment added: “it is essential that any interesting idea is calculated to make more impression upon the mind, when conveyed in musical verses, than when delivered in the form of common conversation.” Incidentally, hymns have made Brahmo prayers so attractive, opening up a world of beauty and imagination, if not hard truth, which have been carried to such heights in the devotional songs of Tagore.

The pivot of Rammohun’s worship was the ancient formula “om-tat-sat” — which implies that “the object contemplated by om can be described only as ‘that’ which ‘is existing’,” (Divine Worship.) This existence itself may be a matter of rational debate; how far from this existence one can reasonably travel to the other attributes of god will remain a matter of controversy. In the standard mantra preacing every Brahmo invocation or aradhana of god, ten terms are used, of which four (the existence, understanding, eternity, oneness) are the very essence of Rammohun’s conception, four are at best derivative, while two seem redundant.

DOCTRINES OF THE SOUL, SIN, AFTERLIFE

Doctrines about the nature of the soul, sin and virtue, afterlife, interrelated as they are, constitute a ticklish problem for any religion. The concept of the soul and its survival after death is of course a solace in this vale of misery; that of sin and virtue with their consequences are hold to be the cement of society. Yet such concepts do not flow with automatic logic even out of the acceptance of the idea of god’s existence. The logical difficulties involved can be ruled out by absolute monism, but absolute monism is a negation of any religious practice. It may dole out intellectual satisfaction to the thinker, handing over worship to the tender mercies of the priesthood and vulgar minds.

About the soul, Rammohun remarked in the Kathopanishad: “Various opinions are held by contending parties. When the subject
is explained by a person who believes the soul to emanate from god, doubts in regard to its eternity cease. A wise man knowing the resplendent soul, through a mind abstracted from worldly objects, and constantly applied to it, neither rejoices nor does he grieve. The soul is not liable to birth nor to death; it is mere understanding. It is unborn, eternal. The soul is not injured by the hurt which the body may receive. It resides in the hearts of all living creatures. No man can acquire a knowledge of the soul without abstention from evil acts but through his knowledge of god. acquire knowledge of god, the origin of the soul.” From the Kena Upanishad: the supreme being is “the soul of the universe; and bears the same relation to all material extensions that a human soul does to the individual body with which it is connected.” In The Brahanical Magazine, I, we are told that individual souls are, “as it were, the reflection of the supreme being on matter”, bright or dull according to the nature of the matter concerned; “souls appear different like candle flames”, liable to be “absorbed into universal heat of god”; the soul, being, “an interior agent” or a “partial resemblance”, cannot be independent of or equal to god.

Rammohun’s defence of the concept of the soul runs thus: “If the individual soul does not proceed from god, is it created out of nothing? That would set aside reason and inference, and in that case there remains no means to prove the existence of god. It would strengthen atheistical tenets and destroy all religion.” (Ibid.) Intrinsically as a religious man, Rammohun naturally rules atheism out of court without arguing about it.

About the nature of sin, Rammohun is brief enough. His system defines sin as evil thoughts proceeding from the heart, quite unconnected with “observances as to diet and other matters of form.” (Kathopanishad, Introduction.) In the internal struggle between this “desire of indulgence” and the “social inclination”, the means of ultimate victory over the former is “sincere repentance and solemn meditation, which occasion mental disquiet and anxiety forming the punishment of sin. The sin which mankind contracts against god, by the practice of wickedness, is believed by us to be expiated by those penances.” (The Brahanical Magazine, IV.)

Sin carries consequences. The individual soul is “rewarded or punished according to its good or evil actions.” (Kathopanishad.) “The soul so pressed down in the body, being deluded with ignorance, grieves at its own insufficiency; but when it perceives its cohabitant,
the adorable lord of the universe . . . it feels relieved from grief and infatuation . . . A wise man knowing god as perspicuously residing in all creatures forsakes all idea of duality; being conceived that there is only one real existence, which is god.” (Mundaka Upanishad.) The soul originates from god but is liable for “the consequences of good and evil works” leading to “reward or punishment.” (The Brahmanical Magazine, I.)

The consequences occur in life and after death, for only atheists argue that there is no future state. Rammohun defended the sastric teaching (Ibid., II.) without his usual appeal to reasoning however. The consequences of good or evil works are “experienced even in this world”, or “god after death inflicts the consequences of the sins or holiness of some in hell or heaven”, even to the length of “giving them other bodies animate or inanimate.” This is indeed sliding down far from Rammohun’s own rationalism in the Tuhfat. This opens the door to transmigration and karmaphala, ignoring the obvious objection that reward or punishment after death loses its rational force when no memory is carried of the antecedent act which is its cause. It is worth recalling however the formulation: “The Vedanta does not confine the reward or punishment of good or evil works to the state after death, much less to a particular day of judgment.” (Ibid., IV.)

Rammohun firmly believed that contemplation and knowledge of the supreme being were the way out of the network of punishment. That escape is integral to the concept of beatitude. “A knowledge of the supreme spirit is alone the cause of beatitude.” (Monotheistical System.) “A true knowledge respecting god is the only way to eternal beatitude.” (Mundaka Upanishad.) Eternal beatitude is allotted to the wise man in god; “when all the desires settled in the heart leave man, the mortal then becomes immortal, and acquire absorption even in this life.” (Kathopanishad.) Men, acquiring knowledge of god, “after their departure from this world are absorbed into the supreme being.” (Kena Upanishad.) Incidentally, popular notions of individual personal life after death do not figure in Rammohun’s writings.

CRUSADE AGAINST CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY

Rammohun was drawn into polemics on Christianity almost by accident. In 1820 he published his Precepts of Jesus, proclaiming that the Christian notion of a supreme superintending power and the law that man should do unto others as he would wish to be done by
tend to render our existence agreeable and profitable. The moral doctrines of Jesus, conducive to peace and harmony, "are beyond the reach of metaphysical perversion, and intelligible alike to the learned and the unlearned." Orthodox Christians were roused to fury, naturally as the divinity of Christ was implicitly denied, and attacks poured upon Rammohun.

Rammohun in his reply indicated the Christian missionaries in India. "In Bengal where the English are the sole rulers, and where the mere name of Englishman is sufficient to frighten people, an encroachment upon the rights of her poor timid and humble inhabitants and upon their religion cannot be viewed in the eyes of god or the public as a justifiable act." Again: "to introduce a religion by means of abuse and insult, or by affording the hope of worldly gain, is inconsistent with reason and justice." (The Brahmical Magazine, I.) The missionaries ignore the higher Hindu teaching and ridicule the idolatry; yet do they not endow "Jesus Christ, the very god", with external impressions and sensations? (Ibid., II.) In the Humble Suggestions however he added that we should not be angry with the missionaries, but rather feel "compassion" for the blindness of their errors, as it is almost impossible "for men, when possessed of wealth and power, to perceive their own defects."

Rammohun pointed out these "errors" in his assault on trinitarianism, the heart of orthodox Christianity. Is the Christian god a proper noun or a common noun with three numbers? The concept of the trinity is "so palpably contrary to reason and experience." Christians are "biased in favour of the doctrine" because of the impression of early education. Christianity in India is trying to substitute "one set of polytheistical sentiments" for another, both of them protected only by a "shield of mystery". If the omnipotence and omniscience of one of the three is sufficient, "the omnipotence and omniscience of the second and the third is superfluous and absurd; but if not sufficient, why should we stop at the number three?" Moderate commonsense unperverted by early prejudice enables any one "to tear off the particoloured veil of sophistry from the face of this creed . . . contradictory to common sense and opposed to the evidence of the senses." The quotations are from The Brahmical Magazine, III and IV.

The plea that the revealed Bible is the authority for the doctrine meets with the retort: "Can any book which contains an idea that defers the use of the senses be considered worthy to be ascribed to that being who has endowed the human race with senses?" (Ibid., III.)
Yet Rammohun did not lack in respect for the Christian faith. In a letter to Ware (1824) he said: “Christianity, if properly inculcated, has a greater tendency to improve the moral, social and political state of mankind than any other known religious system.”

And he was on intimate terms with the unitarian Christians of Bengal and in friendly touch with unitarians abroad. In his *Answer of a Hindu*, he justified his attendance at unitarian services (before his own Brahma Samaj had arisen) for many reasons including—the unitarian inculcation of the doctrine of divine unity, acceptable to the Vedas also; the rejection of polytheism and idolatry, even in all sophistical modification; the denial of allegories, Brahmanical and trinitarian alike; and the turning down of the idea of “man-god” fostered alike by the Brahmans and “another body of priests better dressed, better provided for and eminently elevated by virtue of conquest.”

**TRADITION AND REASON**

In his Introduction to the *Kena Upanishad*, Rammohun thus defined his position: “When we look to the traditions of ancient nations, we often find them at variance with each other; and when . . . we appeal to reason as a surer guide, we soon find how incompetent it is, alone, to conduct us to the object of our pursuit . . . it only serves to generate a universal doubt, incompatible with principles on which our comfort and happiness mainly depend. The best method perhaps is neither to give ourselves up to the guidance of the one or the other; but by a proper use of the lights furnished by both, endeavour to improve our intellectual and moral faculties.” The balancing was doubtless difficult; but perhaps the very modern concept of “comfort and happiness” came in handy as an aid in the quest.

The traditional respect for the Vedas which Rammohun felt may be illustrated by certain references. In the *Abridgement of Vedanta* he mentions that the Veda itself stated that it was “created by the supreme being”. In the *Monotheistical System* he declared that “I never advanced on religious controversy any argument which was not founded upon the authorities of the Vedas and their celebrated commentators.” In *The Brahmanical Magazine*, IV, he went even further and talked of “the inspired Vedas”, “the divine guidance of the Vedas and the dictates of pure reason”; he added, “the Veda is the law of god revealed and introduced for our rule and guidance.” It is however possible that such characterisation of the Veda was rendered neces-
sary to gain an audience for his debates, just as the abstention from open defiance of caste rules and the veneration showed to the Vedas in the first Brahmo prayers might have risen from mixed motives—the line of least resistance as well as the traditions of the people.

Certainly Rammohun’s appeal to reason is more frequent. The Monotheistical System roundly declares that a “rational being” cannot make use of objects to bring god to his “recollection”. If passages of the Veda, seemingly at variance with each other (the unity of god and the plurality of gods), are not allowed to be reconciled by our reasoning, “the whole work must, I am afraid, not only be stripped of its authority, but be looked upon as altogether unintelligible.” (Kena Upanishad.) We acquire a notion of god through “observation of natural phenomena”; if we reject this “medium of conviction” and force upon us “a belief of the production of matter from nothing, and of its liability to entire annihilation”, then nothing will remain in reasoning to justify a notion of god. (Divine Worship.) Reasoning must be allowed to reconcile contradictory passages in the Vedas, otherwise the Veda must “necessarily be supposed to be inconsistent with itself, and therefore altogether unintelligible.” (Abridgement of Vedanta.)

If we withhold confidence from traditions of sacred texts, for the mere possibility of errors in translation, our belief must be shaken in all information about foreign history and theology. (Hindu Theism.) But, “As long as men have the use of their senses and faculties... they never can be expected to be deluded by any circumlocations founded upon circumstances not only beyond understanding but also contrary to experience and to the evidence of the senses.” (The Brahmánical Magazine, III.) “A man will find it very hard, if not utterly impossible, to believe what is diametrically opposite to his senses, to his experience, to the uniform course of nature, and to the first axioms of reason.” (Ibid., IV.) Again: “if we set out on this irrational career, where are we to stop? May we not from the example set in theology lay aside the use of reason in other sciences also and thereby impede the progress of knowledge and introduce incalculable evils into this world?” (Ibid., IV.) “A thing is justly denied when found contrary to sense and reason.” (Monotheistical System.)

Commonsense also is repeatedly invoked, for example, in Ishopanishad (Preface); in the Abridgement of Vedanta (both Introduction and Text); in the Hindu Theism. “Truth and true religion do not always belong to wealth and power, high names, or lofty palaces.” (The Brahmánical Magazine, I.)
Even more remarkable is the use by Rammohun of the very modern concepts of social comfort, compassion and social texture in religious thinking. "My constant reflections on the inconvenient, or rather injurious rites introduced by the peculiar practice of Hindoo idolatry, which ... destroys the texture of society, together with compassion for my countrymen, have compelled me the use every possible effort to awaken them." (Abridgement of Vedanta.) He stated his aim to be to correct those exceptional practices, "which not only deprive Hindoos in general of the common comforts of society, but also lead them frequently to self-destruction." (Kena Upanishad, Introduction.) "Idolatry ... must also be looked upon with great horror ... as leading directly to immorality and destructive of social comforts." Also, "a sense of the duty which one man owes to another compels me to exert my utmost endeavours to rescue them from imposition and servitude, and promote their comfort and happiness." (Monotheistical System.) "Tho advocates of idolatry ... practise a system which destroys, to the utmost degree, the natural texture of society." (Kathopanishad, Introduction.) "The Vedas, coinciding with the natural desires of social intercourse ... require of men to moderate those appetites and regulate those passions, in a manner calculated to preserve the peace and comfort of society, and secure their future happiness." (The Brahmanical Magazine, IV.)

In this collectivist approach, Rammohun's religion undoubtedly links up with his dreams of a new Bengal with intellectual, social, economic, and even political reforms. It ushers in a modern age in our country however limited its own direct circle might have been.

A chronological list of Rammohun's English writings on religion used in this essay is appended below:
1816 — Abridgement of the Vedanta
1816 — Translation of the Ishopanishad
1816 — Translation of the Kena Upanishad
1817 — A Defence of Hindu Theism
1817 — A Second Defence of the Monotheistical System
1819 — Translation of the Mundaka Upanishad
1819 — Translation of the Kathopanishad
1820 — An Apology for the Pursuit of Final Beatitude
1820 — The Precepts of Jesus
1823 — The Brahmanical Magazine, No. IV
1823 — Humble Suggestions
1825 — *Different Modes of Worship*
1827 — *Tract on the Divine Worship*
1827 — *Answer of a Hindu*
1828 — *Trust Deed of the Brahmo Samaj*
1829 — *Religious Instructions*
1832 — *Collected Translations.*
Economic Thought of Rammohun Roy

The evidence submitted by Rammohun Roy in connection with the discussions leading to the revision of the East India Company's Charter in 1833 is, of course, not unknown to students of history and has been utilised by scholars*. Yet the full text is not easily available though it is worthy of a minute study. Its importance is two-fold. Firstly, it is a succinct, admirable and trustworthy contemporary record written by one who is at home with his subject, so that every sentence conveys a sense of assurance and a commendable width of vision. Secondly, the testimony throws light on the outlook of Rammohun himself, an attitude to which justice has not been done even by some of our most eminent historians.

The material discussed consists of (i) preliminary remarks of Rammohun Roy; (ii) Rammohun’s answers to 54 questions on the revenue system of India; (iii) his paper in 27 paragraphs on the same subject (both dated 19 August 1831); (iv) his answers to 78 questions on the judicial system of India (19 September 1831); (v) the reply (28 September 1831) to 13 additional queries respecting the conditions of India; (vi) an exposition of the practical operation of the judicial and revenue systems, in the form of explanatory notes on the evidence submitted to the authorities; (vii) the answers (19 March 1832) to 12 queries on the salt monopoly; and (viii) remarks (14th July 1832) on settlement in India by Europeans. The entire text is indeed of absorbing interest. No summary can be adequate to convey the richness of the matter mentioned. It is hoped that the reprint of the entire material in a handy form will be of use to students of economic history.

Rammohun himself came from the landed gentry but greatness in the form of a love for his people shines through the whole evidence. “Under both systems” (permanent and ryotwari) “the condition of

the cultivators is very miserable; in the one they are placed at the mercy of the zemindar’s avarice and ambition, in the other they are subjected to the extortions and intrigues of the surveyors and other government revenue officers. I deeply compassionate both.” He demanded that “no further measurements or increase of rent, on any pretence whatsoever, should be allowed”, for landlords went on raising the rents of the cultivators “through their local influence and intrigues.” His advice was to the effect—“where the rents are very high, reduce the rents payable by the cultivators to the landholders.” “I regret to say that the legal protection of the cultivators is not at all such as could be desired.” “There is in practice no fixed standard to afford security to the cultivators for the rate or amount of rent demandable from them.”

Analysing the effects of the Permanent Settlement, Rammohun had no hesitation in declaring that the condition of the cultivators “has not been improving in any degree”, while the condition of the proprietors “has been much improved”, as, secured against any higher demand of government revenue, they have brought “wastelands into cultivation, and raised the rents of their tenantry.” As for the government, they have “sacrificed nothing in concluding that settlement.” The brunt had fallen squarely on the tenants who lived in “overwhelming poverty”.

“When grain is abundant and therefore cheap, they are obliged, as already observed, to sell their whole produce to satisfy their landlords”; “in dear years they may be able to retain some portion of the crop to form a part of their subsistence, but by no means enough for the whole.” “It is well-known that . . . there are to be found very few, if any, besides proprietors of land, that have the least pretension to wealth or independence, or even the common comforts of life.” “I have . . . often observed the poorer classes living on rice and salt only.” He added: “such is the melancholy condition of the agricultural labourers, that it always gives me the greatest pain to allude to it.”

While in the Permanent Settlement the government liberally relieved the proprietors, Rammohun noted that “I am at a loss to conceive why this indulgence was not extended to their tenants, by requiring proprietors to follow the example of government, in fixing a definite rent to be recovered from each cultivator . . . or why the feeling of compassion, excited by the miserable condition of the cultivators, does not now induce the government to fix a maximum standard . . . and positively interdict any further increases.” Here indeed is the crux of the
matter, the nature of early British Indian economic policy has been laid bare by a sure hand. And we see the rationalist in the following passage: "Some, however, doubt whether government can now assume the power of bettering the condition of this immense portion of its subjects, without violating the long-standing practice of the country . . . at least for the last forty years; but I am satisfied that an unjust precedent and practice, even of longer standing, cannot be considered as the standard of justice by an enlightened government."

We have interesting passages on questions of interest: the recognition of some kind of labour (service) rent; the close cooperation between the zemindars and the police; the evident collusion in the auction of defaulting estates; the need to ensure that "the collectors should not by any means be armed with magisterial powers"; the advocacy of colonisation by superior types of Europeans to introduce "superior methods of cultivation"; "the great alarm and distrust amongst the natives" produced by the resumption of rent-free lands by Regulation III of 1828; the desirability of reducing the cost of the revenue establishment; and the urgency of relief. "I must conclude with beseeching any and every authority to devise some mode of alleviating the present miseries of the agricultural peasantry of India."

In connection with judicial administration, Rammohun held that the "first obstacle to the administration of justice is that the administrators, and the persons among whom it is administered, have no common language". "It is not expected that European judges should be generally competent to determine difficult questions of evidence among a people whose language, feelings and habits of thinking and acting are so totally different from their own." He pointed out "the absence of reporters and of a public press, to take notice of the proceedings of the courts in the interior"; "consequently there is no superintendence of public opinion". Thus, "the respectable and intelligent native inhabitants cannot be expected to have confidence in the general operation of the judicial system". "It is necessary to have recourse to trial by jury, as being the only effectual check against corruption", specially since the "principle of juries, under certain modifications, has, from the most remote periods, been well understood in this country, under the name of punchayet." It was also desirable that "judges of the Sudder Dewanee Adawlut should have the power of issuing the writ of habeas corpus." The evidence proceeds to argue in almost a Benthamite fashion for the framing of a "code of criminal law for India" as well as a "code of civil law", based on common acknowledged principles, simple and
precise, not standing in need of explanation by a reference to books of religious authority.

We find also, amidst a variety of comments, a condemnation of sending out to India young civilians who are “placed in a situation calculated to plunge them into many errors, make them overstep the bounds of duty to their fellow creatures and fellow subjects”; also, a suggestion that any project of law, before it is finally adopted, should be circulated for opinion to the responsible sections of the Indian people — “the principal zemindars”; “the highly respectable merchants”, the muftis and “the head native officers”. The liberal aim of the age is clearly formulated: through increasing association of the Indians with the administration, “the natives may become attached to the present system of government, so that it may become consolidated, and maintain itself by the influence of the intelligent and respectable classes of the inhabitants, and by the general goodwill of the people, and not any longer stand isolated in the midst of its subjects, supporting itself merely by the exertion of superior force.” (Italics ours.)

The answers to the additional queries are of a miscellaneous character but illuminating in their own way; the need for a “frequent and common use of a moderate proportion of animal food” in the Indian diet; the assertion that the people of India have “the same capability of improvement as any other civilised people”; a tribute to the secular education established “on a highly respectable and firm footing” at the Hindu College in Calcutta despite Christian objections to a godless education; and the admission that “men of aspiring character . . . are decidedly disaffected” towards the existing form of government, while the beneficiary classes (those “who engage prosperously in commerce”; “those who are secured in the peaceful possession of their estates by the Permanent Settlement”; and “such as have sufficient intelligence to foresee the probability of future improvement which presents itself under the British rule”) naturally incline the other way. The mass of the common people, we are told, are “indifferent about either the former or present government”.

Rammohun’s explanatory notes on the evidence submitted to the authorities in England are worthy of particular notice as they have attracted little attention. Equally remarkable are his views on the salt monopoly involving the distress of the people in consequence and on the controversial question of European settlement in India.

It is good to hear an authentic voice speak out, in such a forthright fashion and with such evident knowledge of the problems of our country, across five generations.
David Hare

David Hare, a Scotsman, devoted the best part of his life, over four decades (1800–42), to the people of Bengal. He was a main architect of the new education, the foundation of our 19th century regeneration and renaissance.

David Hare was born, 17 February 1775, presumably in London where his father was a watchmaker. David's mother came from Aberdeen which he visited to meet her people before coming out to India. It is a mark of his reticence that his Indian friends remained ignorant of the names of his parents.

David had three brothers — Joseph, a businessman, at 48 Bedford Square, London; Alexander (James ?), who came to India and had a daughter, Janet; and John, who visited India also but settled with Joseph, and had a daughter, Rosalind.

At David's request, his family took good care of his friend, Rammohun Roy, in England. Rammohun was persuaded to stay with them for some time; a niece attended his last illness at Stapleton Grove; all the Hares came to the Raja's interment, 18 October 1833.

David himself was a life-long bachelor.

David Hare was a philanthropist, no intellectual scholar, though the intellect of contemporary Scotland must have touched him. He “must have received a good plain education”, was well-informed and had read the best authors, with a library of his own. He spoke and wrote effectively, and acquired a smattering of Hindustani and “broken Bengali”.

He took up the watch trade in Calcutta (1800), shifting next year from Larkins Lane to the “southwest corner of the church yard” near the street which still bears his name. He transferred (1 January 1820) his successful business to Gray, his assistant and possibly a relative with whom he continued to live in Hare Street till death. David invested his profits in landed property round the present College Square, but generosity drove him to debts; part of the land he sold cheap.
to Sanskrit College; another part he gifted to house the Hindu College.

The controversy about the founder of the Hindu College ought to be settled by the *Calcutta Christian Observer*, 1832. It states, on the authority of Derozio, that Hare mooted, at Rammohun’s house in 1815, a scheme for a metropolitan education centre, as an “amendment” to the Raja’s projected religious society. In Hare’s own words later: “I was enabled to discover, during my intercourse with several natve gentlemen, that nothing but education was requisite to render the Hindoos happy.” It was Hare’s plan which was carried “by a native” to Hyde East who convened the foundation meeting on 14 May 1816. Near-contemporaries regarded Hare as the real founder of the great college — Kishorichand Mitra (1862), Rajnarayan Bose (1874, 1876); Pearychand Mitra (1877). Hare also helped drafting of the original college rules.

Hare was associated with the School Book Society of 4 July 1817 for the “cheap or gratuitous supply of useful school books other than religious, in English and oriental languages”, contributing Rs. 100 annually.

The School Society of 1 September 1818 was largely sustained by Hare, its European secretary (1823–42), who in 1828 gave it Rs. 6,000. The society helped existing schools and started new free schools, for example at Thanthania (Arpuli) and Champatala (Pataldanga); these two merged by 1834 in Hare School. Hare employed Krishnamohan Banerji and Rasikkrisna Mallik as teachers at Pataldanga, but had to remove the two “firebrands” reluctantly on orthodox pressure. From 1819–20, thirty free scholars were sent up by his schools regularly to the Hindu College where they formed its elite of “ornaments”.

Hare devoted his entire day to the schools and the college where he was visitor (1819), inspector (1824), committee member (1825). He befriended the great Derozio, protecting him from the head D’Anselme, standing up for the maligned teacher of Young Bengal at the time of the dismissal (1831).

After Derozio, Hare was the ally of Young Bengal. He was the protector of the Academic Association and patron of the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge (1838). He appeared with the Derozians in public meetings — against press regulations (15 January 1835); for extension of the jury (8 July 1835); against indentured labour (10 July 1835); for cooperation with the British India Society (1839). He rescued “coolies” intended for Mauritius from a Pataldanga house. He participated in the petition for the use of English
in “mofussil” courts (1835) and the agitation for legal reforms (1836).

The Derozians reciprocated Hare’s friendship. They (565 young men) were the first to publicly honour Hare, on his 56th birthday; they secured his portrait (now in Hare School) and erected the 1847 memorial statue (in Presidency College now); they organised the Hare Prize Fund and the anniversary meetings after death for 25 years without a break; one of them produced the standard biography.

Hare fully stressed Bengali education in his schools. In the fitness of things, he was asked to lay the foundation (14 June 1839) of the Bengali Pathshala in Hindu College grounds. He subscribed to the Ladies’ Society for Native Female Education (1824).

The principal of the epoch-making Calcutta Medical College (1 February 1835) noted: “Without Mr Hare’s influence an attempt to form a Hindu Medical class would have been futile.” From 1837 to 1841, Hare was its secretary and treasurer, virtually its principal.

Hare was a member of the Agri-Horticultural and Asiatic Societies, a donor to the District Charitable Society.

His financial difficulties due to generosity were eased too late by his appointment (1840) as the third commissioner to the Court of Requests on a salary of Rs. 1,000.

Hare died suddenly of cholera on 1 June 1842. On a rain-sodden inclement day, 5,000 Indians followed his body from the Hare Street residence to the grave in College Square, in his own land appropriately.

With a warmth rare indeed in official documents, James Kerr noted in his Review: “It was the manifest interest he felt in the work, in the exertions of the masters and in the progress of the students, mixing freely with the latter ... joining in their amusements ... giving them advice ... and assisting them ... in obtaining situations, that made him so beloved and so useful. He used also, when they were sick, to visit them at their houses, bringing medicine to them ... even Hindu women would lay aside their reserve and consult him as they would a father or brother.”

Hare said himself: “It has always been a rule with me never to bring myself into public notice.” But others remembered. Rasikkrishna described his palanquin as a “travelling dispensary”. Would-be students ran after it to catch his kindly eye.

Simple in habits, Hare developed Bengali food-tastes. Unostentatious but sociable, he attended Hindu social gatherings. Fond of walking, he covered 28 miles one night.

Rationalism drew him close to Derozio. Common to both was the
conviction that India needed most “a dissemination of European learning and science”. Both encouraged freedom of thinking and personal integrity “to throw off the fetters of that antiquated bigotry which still clung to their countrymen”. Both were beloved of the students whom Hare called “reformers and instructors”. And both were “godless” secularists. Hare was unwilling to admit “half Christians” who “will spoil my boys”; he has even been termed “an atheist”; the *Friend of India* refers to his “inveterate hostility” to organised Christianity; and he was not buried in consecrated ground.

“The Young Bengal Address” (1831) spoke of Hare as “the man who has breathed a new life in Hindu society, who has voluntarily become the friend of a friendless people, and set an example to his own countrymen and ours”. The “Memorial Statue (1847)” adds that Hare “having acquired an ample competence cheerfully relinquished the prospect of returning to enjoy it in his native land in order to promote the welfare of that of his adoption.”

Macaulay observed in 1835: “Of all those who now take an interest in the cause of native education, Mr Hare, we believe, was the first in the field ... to induce the native inhabitants ... to cultivate the English language ... as the most convenient channel through which access was to be obtained to the science of the West.”

One abiding result of Hare’s work was the pure secular education in the college founded by the orthodox but shaped by him. And the Derozian Radhanath Sikdar aptly compared him to “the morning star”.

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Derozio and Young Bengal

The thought of young Bengal (Peyarchand Mitra, one of the circle, called it in 1877 “Young Calcutta”) flowed through the fourth decade of the 19th century, arising in the late twenties and ebbing away after the mid-forties. Its inspirer was Derozio (1809–31), competent scholar, gifted writer, radical thinker and the most famous of our teachers in the new education. It will be unusual to link with Young Bengal a second name, that of David Hare (1775–1842) who seems so different from Derozio in so many ways. Hare was indeed no professional instructor or intellectual, no man of letters or of academic learning. He had neither the brilliance nor the waywardness of his contemporary; unlike him he had become in diet and habits almost a half Hindu. Yet between the two may be detected an underlying resemblance which furnishes a key to a proper estimation of Young Bengal.

Common to both was the passionate conviction that for India nothing was more essential than “a dissemination of European learning and science among her people”. Both encouraged freedom of thinking and discussion and inspired a courage and personal integrity in their followers “to throw off the fetters of that antiquated bigotry which still clung to their countrymen”. And unlike other leaders around them, both were “godless” secularists with little faith in denominations or religious instruction, and yet staunch idealists. Nor can one forget that, in the hour of trial, Hare tried to stand by Derozio and his maligned pupils about whom he declared: “your countrymen look upon you as their reformers and instructors”; while the Derozians were the first to honour Hare publicly, and after his death they were in the forefront in the endeavour to perpetuate his memory, in the unique first of June anniversaries for 25 years without a break.

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was a Calcutta Eurasian of Portuguese-Indian ancestry, the son of an officer in an English mercantile firm. (In the Hindu College Records of 1831, the name is occasionally spelt as De Rozio; Max Muller wrote D. Rozario.) He was educated in
one of the pioneer English-teaching private schools of the early 19th century, run by the Scotsman, Drummond, in the Dharamtala area. Drummond was a scholar poet, and as a notorious free-thinker an exile from his native land. It may safely be conjectured that Derozio derived from Drummond his taste in literature and philosophy, his love of Burns, his faith in the French revolution and English radicalism.

After finishing school and a short spell of clerkship in his father's office, young Derozio stayed for some time at Bhagalpur at the house of his aunt, a Mrs Wilson. Here he blossomed out as a writer, contributing to the India Gazette, composing poems (including the Fakir of Jhungeera, inspired by local legends). He wrote patriotic verse, unusual in one from his community, earlier than Kashiprasad Ghose:

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

Derozio's youthful critique on Kant was considered as something which "would not disgrace even gifted philosophers"; his translation of a French essay on moral philosophy was printed posthumously. The fame already won secured him an appointment as teacher to the senior classes in the Hindu College before he had ended his "teens", early in 1826 (1827 according to Kishorichand Mitra, 1828 according to Edwardes). Back in Calcutta, Derozio is said to have edited the Hesperus and the Calcutta Literary Gazette; to have acted as editor-assistant to the India Gazette, "ultraradical in its politics"; and to have written for the Calcutta Magazine, the Indian Magazine, the Bengal Annual, the Kaleidoscope. One of his poems greeted the liberation of Greece at the battle of Navarino; another hailed the legislative prohibition of widow-burning in India.

Derozio's personality brought "a new era in the annals of the college", the youthful teacher drawing the senior boys "like a magnet" round him. According to his biographer, "neither before, nor since his day has any teacher, within the walls of any native educational establishment in India, ever exercised such an influence over his pupils." Not alone in the classrooms, but outside the hours as well, he strove with success "to broaden and deepen the knowledge of his pupils" in western thought and literature, the new fountain which emancipated and intoxicated. The college students clustered round him and very many of them carried down to their last days the deep impress stamped on them by their master. This was the cementing link which held
together the Young Bengal group, the memory which made a close-knit fellowship of affection and friendship even in later life. Derozio's own approach to the bright young men round him has been preserved in his lines still fondly recalled by his college:

Expanding like the petals of young flowers
I watch the gentle opening of your minds
And the sweet loosening of the spell that binds
Your intellectual energies and powers.

What joyance rains upon me when I see
Fame in the mirror of futurity
Weaving the chaplets you have yet to gain.
And then I feel I have not lived in vain.

Unlike most teachers, Derozio encouraged his students to debate freely and question authority. He urged them to think for themselves, "to be in no way influenced by any of the idols mentioned by Bacon — to live and die for truth." One of his pupils, Radhanath Sikdar, said of him: "He has been the cause and the sole cause of that spirit of inquiry after truth, and that contempt of vice — which cannot but be beneficial to India." Another, Ramgopal Ghose, held up the motto: "He who will not reason is a bigot; he who cannot is a fool; and he who does not is a slave."

Derozio's favourite pupils had a free run of his house in the Entally quarter of the city, and some of them indulged in forbidden food and drink. The tinge of youthful bravado in this should not make us forget the evident sincerity and courage which marked the revolt against tradition in practice, though one may regret that, unlike the young Brahma rebels of a later generation, some at least of Young Bengal aggressively offended the susceptibility of neighbours by a parade of unkind derision. Hindu society was scandalised beyond measure, understandably, though without any real understanding. The assertion of Madhabchandra Mallik in a college magazine — "if there is anything that we hate from the bottom of our heart, it is Hinduism" — was a defiant ebullition of immature irreverence. But the refusal of another student, Rasikkrishna Mallik, in open court to swear by the holy water — "I do not believe in the sacredness of the Ganges" — was a mark of heroic integrity. The addiction to drink in so many Derozians was a touch of weakness. Yet one cannot forget the contemporary testimony of Haramohan Chatterji of the college office: "They were all considered men of truth. Indeed, the college boy was a synonym for truth."
Derozio and his pupils started in 1828 the Academic Association, our first debating club, which discussed topics like free-will and fate, virtue and vice, patriotism, arguments for or against the existence of god, the shames of idolatry and priestcraft. The long weekly meetings were presided over by Derozio whose exhortations were cherished, while the debating talents of the youthful members attracted attention and drew many celebrities in the city to the exciting sessions. The Hindu College boys started the Parthenon magazine (the Athenium, according to Sivanath Sastri) on 15 February 1830 wherein were mooted subjects like women's education, necessity of cheap justice, and the curse of superstition. This organ of the "Hindu by birth, yet European by education" was suppressed after two issues by order of the college visitor, H. H. Wilson. By arrangement with David Hare, Derozio delivered a course of lectures on metaphysics in his school "attended by some four hundred young men", many of whom were delving deep in the new thought of Bacon, Locke, Hume, Smith, Paine or Bentham.

In this atmosphere there was surging up a wave of radical sentiment. In the India Gazette of 12 February 1830, a Hindu College student argued against the current colonisation scheme by an array of historical precedents from ancient to modern times. On 10 December 1830, 200 persons attended the July revolution celebration in the Town Hall. On Christmas day of the same year, the tri-colour flag of the French revolution was hoisted on the monument, apparently by unknown people.

Orthodox society was deeply alarmed. It was rumoured that some Hindu College boys, when required to utter mantras at prayers, would repeat lines from the Iliad instead; that one student, asked to bow down before the goddess Kali, greeted the image with a "good morning, madam". A poor Brahmin, Brindaban Ghoshal, carried to society leaders the daily gossip, spiced richly with scandal-mongering about Derozio and his pupils. Newspapers like the Sambad Prabhakar and the Samachar Chandrika raised a hue and cry about religion in danger from the "atheist beasts" who aped the "vagabond Firingis". In April 1831 the former printed a letter, "reflecting in very unbecoming language upon the character of the teachers of Hindoo College", against which the college committee was constrained to remonstrate. Clearly, the provocation was not entirely on the side of the Derozians.

Even before the newspaper campaign took shape, the managing committee of the Hindu College had become restive. On 5 February
1831 the committee had indeed patched up a quarrel between Derozio and the head master, D'Anselme; when Derozio went with a progress report to D'Anselme, the latter had "lifted his hand to strike Derozio" and when David Hare intervened, D'Anselme had called Hare "a vile sycophant". Evidently the head master had been badly rattled by the storm which had arisen round his subordinate. The incident ended with the usual expression of mutual regrets. The committee however (according to Pearychand Mitra) soon proceeded to pass resolutions "to check as far as possible all disquisitions tending to unsettle the belief of the boys in the great principles of national religion", condemning "practices inconsistent with the Hindu notions of propriety", and prohibiting "the habit of attending societies at which political and religious discussions are held". Finally, committee member Ramkamal Sen took the initiative in calling a special meeting for the removal of Derozio.

The Calcutta Presidency College (into which the old Hindu College was transformed in 1855) still preserves a volume of manuscript records containing the proceedings of the "special meeting of the directors of the Hindoo College" on 23 April 1831. A memorandum was considered proposing among other things that "Mr Derozio being the root of all evils and the cause of public alarm should be discharged from the college"; that "all those students who are publicly hostile to Hinduism and the established custom of the country . . . should be turned out"; that "if any of the boys go to see or attend public lectures to be dismissed"; that "books to be read and time for each study to be fixed." It was urged that Derozio's misconduct was causing the withdrawal of students from the college, though we find from the proceedings of 7 May and 11 June 1831 that withdrawals continued even after Derozio's dismissal.

The committee by a majority of 6 to 3 refused to pronounce Derozio "an improper person to be entrusted with the education of youth", but decided nevertheless to dismiss him "in the present state of public feeling amongst the Hindoo community". Wilson and Hare abstained on the second vote as they could not speak for that community. Radhakanta Deb, Ramkamal Sen, Radhamadhab Banerji and the governor Chandrakumar Tagore held the dismissal to be "necessary"; Prasannakumar Tagore and Rasamoy Datta thought that it was only "expedient"; Srikrishna Sinha alone maintained that it was "unnecessary". No action was taken however against the students.

On Wilson's suggestion, Derozio sent in on 25 April a resignation
letter in which he commented: "unexamined, and unheard, you resolve to dismiss me without even the mockery of a trial". In reply to Wilson’s queries about the "rumoured charges" against him, Derozio sent his explanation on 26 April. His answer to the question whether he had undermined his pupils’ faith in God is deservedly famous in the annals of the Bengal Renaissance:

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

Entrusted as I was for some time with the education of youth, peculiarly circumstanced, was it for me to have made them pert and ignorant dogmatists? ... I therefore thought it my duty to acquaint several of the college students with the substance of Hume’s celebrated dialogue between Cleanthex and Philo, in which the most subtle and refined arguments against theism are adduced. But I have also furnished them with Dr Reid’s and Dugald Stewart’s more acute replies to Hume, replies which to this day continue unrefuted. This is the head and front of my offending. ...

That I should be called a sceptic and infidel is not surprising, as these names are always given to persons who think for themselves in religion. ...

Derozio was forced to leave the college but the spell he had cast on the youth persisted. Krishnamohan Banerji, who was expelled from home in August 1831 for the escapades of some of his young friends, brought out an organ, the Enquirer, and wrote the Persecuted to expose the practical heterodoxy of the orthodox. Rasikkrishna Mallik, who was once drugged and bound to be carried off by relations to some safe distant place but managed to escape and run away from his father’s house, arranged for a second organ, the Jnananveshan; the college committee proceeding of 11 June 1831 has an item — “Letter from Rossiic Kisto Mullic proposing to publish a newspaper and applying for subscription” which was granted.

Derozio himself remained active and established a daily, the East Indian. It is pleasant to find him an idealist to the last and as uncompromising as ever — he was preaching amity between the Anglo-Indian community and other Indians and attacked in his paper the celebration of the Durga puja by Prasannakumar Tagore who called himself a follower of the theistic Rammohun.
On 17 December 1831, Derozio was stricken down with cholera. His favourite disciples rushed to his bedside and battled with death for a week. It came on 26 December and the stormy petrel of our renaissance had sunk to its rest.

Worldly occupations and private interests inevitably scattered in course of time the individual members of the Derozian group, for Young Bengal could never develop into a movement comparable to the various trends in Europe to which the same adjective has been attached. Yet for at least a dozen years after Derozio’s untimely tragic death, his impact continued to be manifested in collective ways.

Radical sentiments continued to find expression every now and then. In 1832 it was reported that the Hindu College students were offering as much as Rs 8 for a copy of Tom Painc’s *Age of Reason* and that one publisher had sold 100 copies at Rs 5 each. In 1836 the *Englishman* noted that the Hindu College students “are all radicals, and the followers of Benthamite principles. The very word ‘tory’ is a sort of ignominy among them . . . they all belong to the school of Adam Smith.” In 1843 an “old Hindu”, who was “engaged in heavy commercial duties”, pined for revolution in a series of essays on Indian grievances.

More specific political thinking by the Derozians was also not wanting. Rasikkrishna Mallik in 1833 criticised police corruption, pointed out the unprotected status of the peasantry under the Permanent Settlement, and advocated the abolition of the political power of the merchant company; in 1834–35 he delivered impressive public orations on the revision of the company’s charter and the freedom of the press. Tarachand Chakrabarti pleaded in 1842 for a state system of technical education as in Orleanist France. In 1842, Ramgopal Ghose in company with the visiting orator George Thompson of anti-slavery fame was “thundering” in the hall of the Faujdari Balakhan; in 1847 his public speaking earned him the epithet of the “Indian Demosthenes”; his *Remarks* defended against European outcry the so-called “black bills” of 1849 which had tried to abolish the judicial immunities of Europeans in India from the ordinary law. Dakshinaranjan Mukherji, in a famous essay on “Judicature and Police” in 1843, described the existing system as one of “extortion and corruption” and incidentally attributed the overthrow of our original equality to the “ambitious and domineering priesthood”. Pearychand Mitra in 1846 pleaded for the protection of the ryot and rose to the level of theory when he main-
tained that "it is private property which gives rise to government, and not government to private property" (echoing Locke's thought introduced by Derozio) and that "the opulent and powerful do not require so much of its constant care and anxiety as the poor and helpless."

The Hindu College men ran several periodicals to serve as platforms. In the last year of Derozio's life, Krishnamohan Banerji inaugurated the Enquirer to fight Hindu obscurantism and Rasikkrishna Mallik began to organise the Jnananveshan, a bilingual journal which lasted till 1844 with the avowed object of instruction in the "science of government and jurisprudence". About 1838, the Hindu Pioneer carried an article on "India and Foreigners" which complained of the people's exclusion from any share in government or office of trust and of the unjustifiable "enormous taxation". Tarachand Chakrabarti conducted a journal called the Quill which freely criticised government policies. In April 1842 was started the Bengal Spectator which began to agitate for competitive civil service examinations and in which in 1843 Radhanath Sikdar unfolded the story of his struggle against government officials to prevent the exaction of forced labour from the Survey of India "coolies". It also supported widow-marriage in principle.

The Derozian penchant for societies was continuing. The pioneer body, the Academic Association, was kept alive till about 1839. David Hare accepted the presidency after Derozio; when a meeting ended he would often stroll in the streets, still talking with the members. It was supplemented by an Epistolary Association in which the Derozians exchanged opinions in the true renaissance humanist style. Rangopal Ghose and Radhanath Sikdar recorded experiences and reflections in the form of diaries, and the former's house was a regular headquarter for the circle of friends. On 20 February 1838 was launched the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge with the Derozians at the helm (president — Tarachand Chakrabarti; vice-president — Rangopal Ghose; secretaries — Pearychand Mitra and Ramtanu Lahiri). The society which began to function on 12 March 1838 elected David Hare as honorary visitor. It published three volumes of papers read between 1840 and 1843 and including the Nature of Historical Studies and Civil and Social Reform (Krishnamohan); Interests of the Female Sex and the State of Hindustan in five parts (Pearychand); Sketch of Bankura (Harachandra Ghosh); Notice of Tipperah, a new Spelling Book and Notices of Chittagong in four parts (Gobinda-chandra Basak). It was a meeting of this society in the Hindu College Hall on 8 February 1843 that Principal Richardson tried to disperse
as seditious, when the president, Tarachand Chakrabarti, sharply called him to order with a famous reproof. Early in 1839 was started a short-lived Mechanical Institute. In 1844, Kishorichand Mitra founded the Hindu Theophilanthropic Society (an echo of Volney, perhaps).

The Derozian societies were cultural associations but they were being drawn towards politics. George Thompson had urged the Bengalis to "abhors expediency" and organise themselves into political associations, more efficacious than even the press. His meetings had aroused the enthusiasm of the men of Young Bengal who about this time were popularly called the "Chakraborti faction" after their seniormost associate, Tarachand. On 20 April 1843 was founded the Bengal British India Society, the "aristocracy of intelligence" as distinct from the "aristocracy of wealth" already organised in the Landholders' Association. The society was merged in the British Indian Association (when it was founded on 31 October 1851) — the first united front of the politically minded educated Indians. By that time Young Bengal as a distinct entity had faded out.

One strange episode recorded by Sivanath Sastri deserves a passing notice. Years afterwards he learned from Bombay friends of a Derozian sannyasi in Kathiawar who always praised his great teacher and once exposed the princede misrule in a series of letters to the press on "Misgovernment at Kathiawad". He was imprisoned for a year but had touched off an agitation which forced the ruler to release him and even to put him in charge of the administration with power to choose his own assistants. After a spell of reform, however, reaction reasserted itself and the sannyasi was expelled from the scene of his activities. This unnamed Derozian has much to our regret remained un-identified.

Biographical sketches of the individual representatives of Young Bengal would take too long a space, but a standard list of the inner circle may be taken from the Life of David Hare with their approximate available dates added: Rasikkrisna Mallik (1810–58), Dakshin ranjan Mukherji (1812–87), Krishnamohan Banerji (1813–85) and Ramgopal Ghose (1815–68) — the four "firebrands" as they were called in their college days; Harachandra Ghose (1808–69), Sibchandra Deb (1811–90), Ramtanu Lahiri (1813–98), Radhanath Sikdar (1813–70) and Pearychand Mitra (1814–83) — only less famous than the first group; Madhabchandra Mallik, Maheschandra Ghose, Gobindachandra Basak and Amritalal Mitra. To these may be added an elder associate, Tarachand Chakrabarti (1804–55), and
a younger, Kishorichand Mitra. All these are famous names in the history of 19th century Bengal. There must have been many more who had come under the magic spell of a teacher who died when barely twentythree.

The Derozians were vilified in their early life when passion ran high; while their individual merits were later admitted, it has become almost a tradition to belittle Young Bengal as a trend. Rajnarayan Bose’s comment in 1875 that “the light from the West had turned their heads” is the representative common judgment. It may however be contended that the favourite verdict is a distorted one, though of course a historical valuation inevitably implies a point of view.

Contemporaries were shocked mostly by the indulgence in the socially forbidden food and drink, in the “cutting their way through ham and beef and wading to liberalism through tumblers of beer.” But this was mainly the means of asserting the right of individual judgement in matters of established customs, not unusual at a critical point of development. Unorthodoxy of this kind may indeed be preferable to the hypocrisy which often prevades a settled orthodox social norm.

The charge of extreme Anglicism has also been over-stressed. Besides the historical excuse of the sudden confrontation with the unexpected wealth of advanced western thought, there remains the evidence that the Derozians did not forsake their country or people in the fashion common to so many later “Anglicised” Indians. From Derozio downwards, patriotism stirred Young Bengal minds; Krishnamohan, even as a Christian missionary since 1837, studied Hindu philosophy and sastric literature; Tarachand translated Manu; the Jnananveshan was conducted partly in Bengali; Ramgopal hailed the Bengali prose of the Tatvabodhini Patrika; Pearychand and Radhanath, two intimate friends, brought out the Masik Patrika, a monthly magazine in simple colloquial Bengali, understandable to ordinary literate housewives; finally, Pearychand (Tekchand Thakur) was a not unimportant contributor to our literature in both the popular and learned styles.

The accusation of irreligion, again, is not entirely correct; the Derozian aim was in truth “to summon Hinduism to the bar of their reason.” As early as 1832, Maheschandra and Krishnamohan turned Christians; Sibchandra in later life became the president of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj and Ramtenu was drawn close to the same faith. The Derozian criticism of early Brahmoism was not pointless: Krishnamohan’s comment that it came “as far as half the way in religion and politics";
Ragopal’s charge that its anticonversion campaign had a tinge of hypocrisy; Ramtanu’s penetrating remark: “The followers of Vedanta temporise. . . . I know that the subversion of idolatry is a consummation devoutly to be wished for, but I do not desire it by employing wrong means . . . there is a spirit of hostility entertained by the society against Christianity which is not creditable . . . Let the votaries of all religions appeal to the reason of their fellow creatures.” Nor can one forget the personal integrity shown by so many Derozians—the impressive honesty in official life of Harachandra and Rasikkrishna; the life of service to neighbours of Sibchandra; the refusal of Ragopal to abjure his beliefs in spite of the threat of social ostracism; Radhanath’s decision, in the teeth of family opposition, not to marry a minor wife; saintly Ramtanu’s heroic renunciation (as early as 1851) of the “sacred thread”.

Many of Young Bengal’s true limitations were not peculiarly its own but shared by our entire renaissance. The educated community of the 19th century failed to understand the exploiting character of the alien British rule in India, looking mainly at its immediate benefits; the protagonists of our “awakening” had little contact with or understanding of the toiling masses who lived in a world apart; the obsession with Hindu traditions and life kept at a distance the community of our Muslim fellow citizens. Such aspects of our renaissance heritage have seriously handicapped the democratic progress of the country.

The real failure of the Young Bengal trend, inevitable perhaps in the circumstances, was the failure to build up a sustained movement and developing ideology. Its most memorable positive aspects are a fearless rationalism and a candid appreciation of the regenerating new thought from the West. Much of this was drowned in the current of traditionalism, mysticism, religiosity and revivalism fashionable in the later part of the century. It is permissible to doubt whether the change has been a gain in our national life.

In the light of such reflections, one can at least look with a certain sympathy to the challenge of Kishorichand Mitra in 1861: “The youthful band of reformers who had been educated at the Hindoo College, like the tops of the Kanchanjunga, were the first to catch and reflect the dawn . . . When has an opposition to popular prejudices been dissociated with difficulty and trouble? . . . To excommunication and its concomitant evils, our friends were subjected . . . Conformity to the idolatrous practices and customs evinces a weak desertion of prin-
ciple. Nonconformity to them on the other hand is a moral obligation which we owe to our conscience.”

To economise space it has been necessary to omit constant references to the main authorities: the *Hindu College Records* of 1831; the sketches of its history by Kishorichand Mitra (1862) and Rajnarayan Bose (1876)—the latter in the useful annotated edition by Shri Debipada Bhattacharya; the standard biographies of Derozio, Hare and Ramtanu Lahiri by Edwardes, Pearychand Mitra and Sivanath Sastri; *Sambadpatre Sekaler Katha* by Brajendranath Banerji and the very valuable study of contemporary journals in Dr B. B. Majumdar’s *History of Political Thought from Rammohun to Dayananda*. Acknowledgement is also due to *Banglur Jagaran* by Kazi Abdul Wadud and to *Notes on the Bengal Renaissance* by the present author. Madge’s booklet on Derozio is now easily available in a recent reprint, 1967. It corrects certain usually accepted facts.
Views on 1857

Eighteen Fifty Seven by Surendra Nath Sen. (The Publications Division, Government of India.)

The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857 by R. C. Majumdar. (Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta.)

The literature on the history of the Indian “mutiny” is already enormous, though almost entirely the work of English authors. But the centenary of such a tremendous upheaval was bound to call forth additional historical efforts, while the achievement of freedom for India has made imperative Indian attempts at revaluation. It is a matter for congratulation that two of our foremost elder historians should take up the task and give us the benefit of their considered opinions. Dr Sen’s volume is sponsored by the Government of India, albeit with the assurance that “it is not an ‘authorised version’ in any sense”. Dr Majumdar’s study, which came out as a private venture a little earlier, is an exposition which he thinks differs radically from the views of the political party in power. Both the surveys present a wealth of material in a handy condensed form and the ability of the two distinguished authors easily makes their contributions an integral part of the storehouse at the disposal of all future students of the subject.

Yet the reader is left with a certain feeling of disappointment. And the reviewer would like with due diffidence to indicate some points of disagreement and criticism in the hope that these will help the discussion on the Indian Revolt which is sure to continue for a long time to come.

I

An attractive feature of Dr Majumdar’s volume is its broad canvas and the wide sweep of its range. He has commendably tried to put the Revolt of 1857 in its proper setting. The entire Book I is devoted to

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the first century of British rule in India with a description of the dis-
content and disaffection engendered by the system of British exploita-
tion. One whole chapter deals with the earlier risings against the 
British, “a continual upsurge of a popular character against the British 
authority”, “the isolated ebullitions which culminated in the great con-
flagration of 1857.” Dr Majumdar has here utilised the illuminating 
researches of Dr S. B. Chaudhuri on the pre-1857 civil resistances, 
which recently attracted so much attention.

There is also a complete chapter on the atrocities which disgraced 
both sides in the turmoil. Outrages committed by the “rebels” are 
widely known for the publicity they have always received from the 
British. British atrocities which were quite as bad, and often much 
more, have long been discreetly passed over. Dr Majumdar has mass-
aged together the undeniable evidences, scattered in the British writings 
themselves, and presented the full story with the argument that “his-
torical truth and political fair-play both demand that the veil should 
be drawn aside.” After all, the outrages of Ncill and Renaud preceded 
the Kanpur massacres; the orgies of Cooper at Ujnailla, when hun-
dreds were executed in a fashion which made one of the executioners 
swoon away, followed the murder of a single officer by a lone fanatic. 
Unconsciously, Dr Majumdar’s chapter thoroughly vindicates Marx’s 
celebrated letter on the “mutiny” atrocities written as early as 4 Sep-
tember 1857.

By the time Dr Majumdar reaches his final review, however (Book 
IV), he commits himself to old views on the character of the outbreak 
of 1857 which are in consonance with the orthodox tradition of the 
average historians of British India, and not radically different as he 
would like us to believe from the usual run of our scholars. What 
makes it all the more surprising is that much of the evidence marsh-
alled in his own volume contradicts some of his major conclusions. 
There is a distinct hiatus between the logical implications of his earlier 
chapters and the formulations towards the end.

There is also one major slip on pages 76 and 77 where Havelock 
is described as the defender of Alambagh at a time when he was 
already dead. Again, a recent letter to the Statesman suggests that the 
“new evidence” on the Rani of Jhansi was not entirely unknown to 
Kincaid when he made his generous estimate of her role.

The author of the officially sponsored history of 1857 has deli-
berately avoided the broad treatment of the subject and the wide 
comprehensive sweep. Instead, Dr Sen has concentrated merely on
the military annals of the mutiny. He has produced, of course, a very competent narrative of the events of the war itself, a reliable summary of all the material available relevant to this, a very readable resume of affairs from such a specific angle. But unfortunately, this government sponsored centenary publication, for which no expense has been spared, does not give us adequately “a fresh review of the causes, character, and consequences of the sepoy war” promised in the preface. Barely 61 pages out of 418 are devoted to the causes and a review of the upheaval as a whole, and that also in a halting manner.

The technical treatment is also not always happy. The different regions are taken one by one and the full story in each case given from start to finish in an isolated manner. The impressive panoramic view of the upsurge, the totality of the crisis, is thus lost to the reader. A synoptic table of dates and events, so valuable in a work like this, has not been added. Even the useful list of the record of each sepoy regiment during the tumult occurs only in the index, and not in the body of the book. The main map does not attempt to indicate (in colour or otherwise) the campaigns and chief incidents as maps may effectively do. The sketch map of the siege of Delhi does not carry on it explanatory notes. The full English translation of the most interesting constitution of the court at Delhi has been left out.

There are also some gaps in the bibliography. It does not mention Kincaid’s well-known essay on the Rani of Jhansi or Dr S. B. Chaudhuri’s book on the earlier civil disturbances. Even the published notes and letters of Marx bearing on the subject have been left unnoticed. And surely a standard official history should have attempted to tap more fully the contemporary newspaper press (including, for example, the Hindoo Patriot or the radical and labour papers in England or France).

II
Indian historical scholarship is still obsessed with the ghost of Ranke. The foreword to Eighteen Fifty Seven begins with the remark that “no objective history of the struggle had yet been written” and that “the time had now come to write a new and objective history of the movement.”

Historical writing, however, involves a process of selection from the mass of available facts on the basis of the author’s conception of what is important and relevant and what is not; an arrangement of the selected material in a coherent manner; an attempt to draw possible
links between different events; a presentation of reflections and inferences which occur to the mind. All these imply a point or points of view, an outlook which is the product of a certain experience and environment. It is idle to pretend that one can shake off such points of view. What can be done is, however, to examine again and again the rationality of a particular point of view and to guard against any suppression of the source material.

The foreword itself falls short of the vaunted "objectivity." Apart from an excessive reference to the first person singular, it proclaims that in 1857 we cannot find "a single instance when there was a clash on a communal basis." This is, of course, belied by the communal fracas at Bijnor, Moradabad, Sirsa, etc. (Majumdar, pp. 60, 65.) The correct conclusion about the remarkable Hindu-Muslim unity in 1857 does not require the sweeping assertion that prior to British rule there was never a Hindu-Muslim problem in our country. And surely it is only a point of view which leads Maulana Azad to deduce from the events of 1857 the deep loyalty of all India to the Mughal court. In Oudh, the chief seat of the popular insurrection, the loyalty of the people turned rather to the old local ruling house which had cut off its formal dependence on Delhi many years ago.

Most of the previous books on the "mutiny," the foreword points out, were written from the British point of view. That point of view has unfortunately penetrated deep into orthodox Indian scholarship itself. The chapter on causes in our official history of 1857 begins just in the old tradition with the detailed grievances of the sepoys from Vellore to the greased cartridge; but the century of civil resistances against British rule is quietly ignored. We read of the British anxiety "to share the blessings of western civilisation" with the Indian people and "the zeal for reform and improvement"; but little emphasis is laid on the system of British exploitation on which there are mountains of facts and which surely is not less obvious than the progress under British rule. One whole paragraph in the chapter on causes deals with the abolition of the sati as a grievance, in the true English style. "The equality of all persons in the eyes of law" is held up as another of the grievances of the Indian aristocracy; the extortions in the practice of revenue collection revealed by the official inquiry on torture are incidentally passed over.

Following the language of English records, our government sponsored history consistently talks of "loyal" elements, the contagion of "rebellion", etc. The reader is not told of the basic fact that India
had come under a colonial imperial domination like some other unfortunate regions of the world which were also trying to shake off the foreign yoke. The social revolution being effected by England in India is equated on page 412, not with the destruction of the ancient economy, but with a few social reforms of doubtful efficacy. The impression is produced necessarily by such treatment that the important thing about the Indian revolt was an unfortunate and lamentable conjunction of the follies and blunders of the rulers and the prejudices and misconceptions of the ruled. No distinction is drawn with sufficient emphasis between the immediate causes which set off the explosion and the deeper causes which led to the spread of the fire far and wide.

III

All discussion about the Revolt of 1857 must turn to the question of its characterisation. In the words of Dr Majumdar, we have to face "the main point at issue, namely the nature of the great outbreak" to be "deduced from the evidence at our disposal." This involves three problems: Was there a popular revolt in 1857-58? Can the movement be regarded as a national struggle? Should the social content of the upheaval be labelled as a feudal reaction?

Was the outbreak a popular revolt, over and above the undoubted military mutiny? Dr Sen admits in a guarded manner that "the revolt commanded popular support in varying degrees in the principal theatres of war." Dr Majumdar notes that it "drifted into a general revolt", but proceeds at once to quote the typically official "brilliant analysis" of Raikes which could "satisfactorily explain" all the facts. The gist of Raikes's explanation is that the fall of British authority engendered natural civil disturbances — "when disaffection means more money, more power, and no taxes, its growth is a mere necessity of human nature." In short, there was a relapse to the primeval state of nature which is supposed to lurk behind all civilisation, a return to the anarchy of the tradition of "the free lances."

Vividly the question of a point of view crops up here, for where in all history will we find a popular revolt which cannot, if you like, be thus characterised? Was the analysis of Norton in 1858, summarised by Dr Majumdar himself, less convincing than that of Raikes? In Oudh, "the whole population was up in arms." There were innumerable fights with matchlockmen and spearmen or bowmen, obviously different from the sepoy mutineers. English refugees "dare not approach the villagers." Nowhere could government officers organise
the people for resistance. The people did not show any opposition to the old proprietors who had come back. The *Narrative of Events* issued by government on 13 September 1857 said: "In consequence of the general nature of the rebellion and the impossibility of identifying the majority of the rebels, magistrates recommended the wholesale burning and destruction of all villages proved to have sent men to take active part in the rebellion." In Oudh, Holmes estimated the number of armed men "who succumbed" at about 150,000, of whom the sepoys were only about 35,000. "English administration in Oudh had vanished like a dream" — said Forrest.

Was the rebellious mentality merely an Oudh phenomenon? Contemporary writers speak of the disaffection, even hatred, of the "natives" towards the English in all parts of Northwest and Central India, just as Russel noted "the beclouded countenance of the villagers around" after the fall of Sankarpur. A Tirhut observer remarked that "every success or fresh rising of the mutineers was marked here with a look of satisfaction"; and Dr Duff explained the little progress in extinguishing the disorders by the fact that it was "a rebellion or revolution." John Lawrence wrote on 19 April 1858: "Had a single leader of ability arisen among them — we must have been lost beyond redemption." Bishop Heber had remarked long before: "Natives of India do not really like us and — if a fair opportunity be offered — would gladly avail themselves of it to rise against us." At Meerut the people at large taunted the sepoys into mutiny; at Jhansi women were seen working in the batteries.

True, military mutinies preceded civil risings generally. Nothing else could be expected where people were unarmed and confronted with a modern military machine. Even then, there were plenty of exceptions — at Muzaffarnagar, Etah, Lucknow on 31 May 1857. There were riots at Patna, insurrection in Chota Nagpur, outbreaks in Hyderabad and the Maratha country, risings in East Punjab — and so on and so forth.

Dr Sen has noted in passing that the Bhils were found wanting by the authorities at the crisis; that the British rulers could not depend on the loyalty of the Punjab villagers; that the Punjabi population also contributed to the rebel strength — to take only a few examples at random.

The cumulative evidence is strong enough to establish the popular character of the Indian revolt, if we adopt the criterion which is generally followed in dealing with the history of other lands. The
evidence is not new and is duly recorded in the books under review, but in a scattered manner. And if a historian in his summing up considers these facts as unimportant or irrelevant, his point of view can fairly come under criticism.

IV

Can the revolt be regarded as a national struggle against foreign rule? Here obviously the answer depends on what we understand by the term “national”.

According to Dr Majumdar, a war of national independence was out of the question at that time—“nationalism or patriotism, in the true sense, was conspicuous by its absence in India till a much later date.” The catch, of course, is in the phrase “in the true sense.” Naturally, the national idea goes on changing from period to period and our “true” concepts may be more precise or developed than in the past. The ideal of an unified all-India nation state or a democratic republic in India was certainly premature for most people in the 19th century, but that does not justify us in denying a national character to far-flung popular struggles for liberation from alien rule, struggles of a more or less unified nature commanding the sympathy of large masses of the population. Such a rigid conception of nationalism “in the true sense” may even lead one to deny the label to the Spanish guerillas or Russian peasants fighting Napoleon; to the French princes and peoples inspired by Joan of Arc to drive out the English intruders; to the Italian Carbonari who had not yet thought of rising in the name of united Italy. We cannot have double standards in historical judgements.

It has to be emphasised that the formation of an all-in national government for the whole country is not the sine qua non in national aspirations. That had not occurred even to Machiavelli. Bourgeois democratic consciousness, the “conception of individual liberty”, need not be sought in the cruder nationalism of the “mutiny” days, just as we do not expect people’s democratic concepts in our national ideas of the early 20th century. But common subjection to a foreign power which was also relentlessly breaking down the old social fabric might easily have been strengthening an Indian sentiment, a vague kind of national feeling which was not yet informed enough for the handful of advanced educated idealists.

It is perfectly in order to point out the crude nature of the nationalism in the air in 1857, as we may very well do in dealing with other
periods in history as well. But that is no reason to deny the national elements in the widespread upheaval which was not “in the same category” as the old wars of the Indian Country Powers when no war of extermination engulfed the land as in 1857. It is amusing that Indian historians skilled in realising the fundamental unity of India and in finding national elements in Rajput heroism. Akbar’s liberalism, or Maratha resurgence suddenly turn to different criteria when confronted with a tumultuous popular upsurge against alien rule.

Some of the ideas advanced by Dr Majumdar are curious. A national war of independence “presupposes a definite plan and organisation.” Not necessarily, as the history of Polish national revolts demonstrates. Our historian could have spared himself the trouble of debunking the leaders as organisers of a general conspiracy. In relation to the main argument, that was merely tilting at the windmills. Dr Majumdar is convinced that the “mutiny” could not have been national as it did not differ much in character from earlier anti-British risings. Of course, these were also popular in nature like the “mutiny” but in the case of the latter, the extensive area, the simultaneous outburst, and the sweep of popular participation lift it to a much higher level.

The eminent historian lays great stress on the limited area of the revolt and the limited number of the actual rebels, to prove that this could not have been a national struggle. The argument of the limited scope was often actually used by the British rulers to minimise our national movement of later days — even in the swadeshi or non-cooperation epochs. In this connection Dr Sen’s remarks are quite pertinent: “Only a determined minority takes an active part in a revolution while the overwhelming majority remains passive, and an interested section might openly align itself with the existing order.” The claim of national status for a movement in the broad sense depends on its aim of liberation from foreign rule, widespread popular participation in the struggle, and general, not necessarily universal, support and sympathy. “There is not the slightest doubt that the rebels wanted to get rid of the alien government.” (Sen, p. 411.) The evidence for popular participation has been indicated above. As for general sympathy for the rebels in region after region, the facts admit of little doubt.

The conscious attempt at Hindu-Muslim unity, in spite of occasional clashes, strengthens this line of reasoning. The Azamgarh proclamation calling upon Indians of all classes to rise against the faithless
British; the Delhi proclamation urging all Hindus and Muslims to unite in the struggle; the efforts of the leaders in Delhi and Bareilly to reassure the Hindus indicate strivings towards some kind of a national outlook. And by what standards can we deny the title of patriot to the Maulavi of Faizabad or Firuz Shah?

Where Dr Majumdar had led a frontal assault, Dr Sen fights a rearguard action and lands himself in some implicit contradiction. He says: "Outside Oudh and Shahabad there is no evidence of that general sympathy which would invest the mutiny with the dignity of a national war." He himself states elsewhere that even in the undisturbed provinces "there was a feeling of impotent disaffection that delighted in every news of British reverse" and that "the people of India felt that they had something in common as against the Englishmen." This is an element of national feeling as distinct from the usual petty localised parochialism, the general sympathy for which he said there was no evidence. That it flared up into an open national war in and around Oudh was due to special reasons, but it was touch and go in very many areas. The British practice at least made no mistake of minimising the danger of the national challenge and went all out to terrorise the entire people.

It is odd to find Dr Sen commenting that "no moral issues were involved in the war of 1857". One would have thought that a popular attempt to throw off foreign domination over large areas when that domination was admittedly oppressive was a sufficiently moral objective.

But was not the upheaval in 1857, after all, a feudal reactionary movement? Dr Majumdar has no hesitation in calling it the "dying groans of an obsolete aristocracy and centrifugal feudalism of the medieval age." Dr Sen holds that the "mutiny leaders would have set the clock back — they wanted a counterrevolution." But he adds cautiously the pertinent comment — "whether military success would have ensured it is another question."

Where feudal ideas are still very powerful, as in 1857, a general movement would be necessarily feudal to that extent. But in the usual characterisation of the "mutiny", "feudal" is quietly equated with "reactionary." The equation, however, is blandly forgotten when our scholars praise the traditional culture of the country also shaped by feudal times.

In the revolt of 1857 feudal ideas are clear enough in the instinctive
turn to the restoration of the empire; in the loyalties to the local chiefs; in the characteristic disorganisation; in the hatred towards western reforms. But they are not sufficient to brand the great upsurge as reactionary. The wars of liberation, if they had not been crushed by superior military power, might easily have generated new ideas and new strength. To beat down British power and to prevent a reconquest, a new energy, western military technique, effective organisation, general cooperation would have become imperative. To assert that new progress would have necessarily emerged may very well be dogmatic. To deny that possibility is even more so.

The general aim — the expulsion of foreign rule and the destruction of what was felt by the mass of people as oppression — cannot fairly be labelled as feudal reaction. If the revolt was unorganised and spontaneous, as our authors have established, the theory of feudal leadership is automatically destroyed. Not one important feudal ruler joined the revolt, the feudal princes betrayed it rather. The number of rebellious chiefs “would not probably exceed one per cent.” (Majumdar, p. 225.) The overwhelming majority of the landlords stood steadily by the alien overlords as protectors, except in the special case of the Oudh talukdars.

The English educated classes were against the movement for their eyes were naturally turned to the benefits only of British rule and the fascination of the moderate constitutional liberal path of progress. Looking back after a century, one is not bound to accept their evaluation. Aware of the evils of the old feudalism, they had not yet realised the terrible price exacted by colonial imperialism, the brunt of the burden of which was borne by the less fortunate common people. In their relatively isolated sphere in the country’s life, they were even coming under the spell of the mystic idea that British conquest was the instrument of providence for India’s uplift, an idea at which the modern historian can only smile.
The National Council of Education

I offer you my heartfelt thanks for your courtesy in making me your guest of honour on this memorable day, though being an outsider I am unworthy for the distinction. I had an opportunity of serving, for almost five years, the Jadavpur University from its inauguration but I had never the privilege of becoming a member of the National Council. When, about 1960, I wanted to join, I was told that its portals were now closed. Of course, in the heroic days of the struggle waged by the Council, circumstances had kept me afar, and I had never shared its glorious burden. Today therefore I can speak only as a student of History, not as a participant of the fight in the past. I crave your indulgence for the garrulity of old age and your gracious forgiveness for any unpleasant comments which may creep into a historical analysis of a noble heritage.

I

I shall begin with a mention of the different aspects in the ideals of the National Council which sprang naturally out of the life of our 19th century renaissance.

The first element was the battle for the establishment of our own control over the education system in the country. In those days foreign domination was prevalent all over the land, and education of course was no exception. With the origin and development of a national consciousness, it was most natural that a demand would arise for a national control over our own education, for the belief that a people’s education must be in the hands of the people concerned.

Secondly, the idea gradually gathered strength that the content of education must reflect the real needs of the people, the substance of education must be shaped to fit the character of the country, that the alien ideas and subject-matter suited to foreign lands must be eradicated. That is, we must remove not merely foreign control but also the foreign content of our education.
Thirdly, many of our 19th century educationists veered round to the view that our educational system must develop a technical-scientific bias for the industrial development of the land. Otherwise we were bound to go down in the face of competition with the outer world, and remained bogged down into the sluggish quagmire of the past. Science and technology were of course the products of the West, but it was essential for us to utilise and master them. In fact, the prevalent educational system in 19th century India had largely a science-less learning. Our foreign masters in effect wanted to provide opportunities for some professional openings for the upper-middle class: teachers, lawyers, doctors, government employees and mercantile officers up to a level. The aim for the lower middle class was of course the recruitment of a horde of clerks. Pure science and practical technology were thus neglected. And our national educationists wanted to remove this slant, to open new horizons in the field of our education.

Fourthly, there was the problem of the educational medium. In 19th century schools and colleges, we were taught in the alien English language. It is however an established truth that students cannot master what they are taught except through the vernacular medium. In a foreign medium, most students fail to develop a free thinking and have to fall back on committing text-books to memory and parrot-like repetitions, with a grasp of the real meaning. Moreover, education in a foreign medium tended to create a deep chasm, an unfathomable gulf between the English educated gentle-folk and the common masses. Some of our 19th century intellectuals thus became advocates for the vernacular medium in education.

Fifthly, the ideal of mass education. The 19th century education was meant for a handful of the upper layer of society. Without the education of the masses, the people would remain a multitude of backward individuals. Hence it was natural for our thoughtful men to think in terms of an education of the whole people.

II

When, on 11 March 1906, the National Council of Education was established, the main achievement in my opinion of its full-fledged ideal was the incorporation, at least on paper, of all of the five elements indicated above: Nation Control, National Content, Technological-Scientific Bias, Vernacular Medium, Mass Education. On an anniversary day, it will be fit and proper however to recall the pioneers,
though they tended to emphasise one or other element only in the total ideal. We may in this connection humbly remind us that even the National Council has not yet succeeded in embodying the full ideal in practice.

It was Rammohun Roy who, in his famous 1923 letter to the Governor-General, emphasised the need for teaching 'useful sciences' like mathematics, natural science, chemistry, physiology. There were some efforts in this direction in the Hindu College, but the higher education in English in our country remained a literary pursuit. The authorities turned down Rammohun's proposals, and even a half-century later Calcutta University could not provide for higher education in Science.

It is probable that higher education was not at first feasible except through the English medium. The Indian languages were still undeveloped. But long after Macaulay's time, was not Bengali sufficiently enriched by the last quarter of the 19th century? Had not Bengali acquired by that stage enough strength through the achievements of our literary men? The Bengali medium did not come because our alien rulers had no interest in the matter, and our educated men had grown too accustomed to the prevalent system. Yet some of our intellectuals did raise the cause of the Bengali medium even in that age. The Derozians are derided as slavish Anglophils, but they did run some Bengali periodicals. As early as 1838, one of them — Udaychandra Dutt — advocated strongly the adoption of Bengali. The Tatvabodhini Pathala, founded by Debendranath Tagore in 1840, had as one of its aims the teaching through Bengali.

Yet another expression of growing national awareness appeared in Nabagopal Mitra's National School (1870), perhaps the first use of the term 'national' in the name of a school.

Bankimchandra Chatterji in the Bangadarshan epoch emphasised another element — the education for the masses. We see in his writings, for example in 1872 and 1878, a deep anguish that the prevalent mode of education created constantly a growing chasm between the educated gentlemen and the deprived masses. He emphatically stressed the need for primary elemental education, curtailing even the educational funds for the upper stratum.

In 1886, Pramathanath Bose wrote a small but significant book advocating the introduction of technical training and the spread of practical technology. From the next year began the almost annual resolutions of the National Congress aiming at an agitation for technical education.
In the last decade of the 19th century a demand for the Bengali medium in our higher education gathered strength. Even Vice-chancellor Gurudas Banerji lent his support to the call in the Convocation Addresses of 1891 and 1892. The opinion was supported by the scientist Prafullachandra Ray and Ramendrasundar Tribedi. 1893 saw the publication of an epoch-making essay by Rabindranath Tagore: “Sikhar Herfer”. He pointed out that a foreign medium keeps aloof the educated classes from the common masses; yet education itself remains stunted, incomplete; education is reduced to a parrot-lore devoid of independent free thinking. His essay is an answer to all the arguments ever advanced against Bengali as our medium of instruction.

In 1895, Satischandra Mukherji established his ‘Bhagabat Chatuspathi’ with the purpose of training up a select band of cadre who would devote themselves to propagate Swadeshi education and culture. He started in 1897 his *Dawn Magazine* famous for its many impressive and instructive discussions on education. Next year he received a notable letter from Sir George Birdwood of England which maintained that western science and technology must of course be incorporated in Indian education, but the main emphasis ought to be on the Indian spiritual cultural heritage and this required necessarily Indian control over the system of education in the country. The *Dawn Magazine* publicised this letter in 1899. Undoubtedly this letter from a foreign friend profoundly influenced the National Council of Education built by Satischandra himself later on.

In 1901, Rabindranath started his celebrated School at Santiniketan. The first attempt was to build a ‘Brahmacharyasram’, an almost ascetic institution on ancient traditional lines; at this stage, Brahmanbandhab Upadhyay, almost a monk himself, was an active worker. But the permanent form in which the school grew up was something different with its perennial values for child-education. Rabindranath’s ideal was that children’s education should best be in the bosom of native, in an intimate connection with mother-earth; that this involves a residential institution where teachers and students live in an intimate fellowship; that school-life must run on easy simple, luxury-free lines; that an atmosphere of beauty would be built up with music and fine arts provided; that the children are to be taught in their own language as medium of instruction.

The *Dawn Magazine* was carrying on its own activity in a tireless fashion. In 1902, Satischandra built the ‘Dawn Society’. He stressed
creative original thinking and research. Distinguished students in the city began to come within his fold.

Rabindranath Tagore drew attention to another direction in his 1904 essay on 'Swadeshi Samaj'. In it he emphasised some of the simple methods in popular education. The village fairs, thronged by people, could be utilised for example. 'Jatras', the talks known as 'Katha-katha', magic lantern lectures are not very expensive. Tagore's advice was to use such methods to popularise the people's education.

In 1904, Jogendrachandra Ghose on the other hand organised a society which aimed at an expansion of scientific-technical instruction. He created a fund which started sending some students abroad for higher training in science and industry.

In 1905, there were many discussions carried on by two magazines, Tagore's Bhandar and Satischandra's Dawn. Very many thoughtful people participated.

In the first wave of the Swadeshi Movements, a natural emphasis was put on free education free from alien control. The cry was to snatch away our own education from the foreigner's grasp. In July 1905, the newspaper Sandhya gave a call for a National University; Calcutta University with its foreign tutelage was promptly dubbed as the 'slave-camp' of the Goldighi.

III

The proclaimed ideals of our National Council of Education did not therefore just drop from the skies. Many aspects in them did appear in the renaissance thought of our own 19th century. But this is how history unfolds itself. Yet the linking up of the different elements was no mean task. The presumptions challenges of our rulers like Curzon did act like a catalyst in the matter.

In 1904, Curzon enacted his new University Act. In the name of raising educational standards, what he did want in reality was a curtailment of education itself, a reduction in the numbers of discontented students, acornering of the seditious educated group. He did not even refrain from insulting the Bengali people itself with his ridicule and satire. In 1905 came the partition of Bengal. Historians have proved that the government did not aim at administrative simplification so much as to cut up the Bengali people itself by putting the segments under different provincial administrations. The reply came up in an outburst of emotions pent-up for long decades. The Swadeshi Movement is its name in our annals.
The sword of repression came down on our aggrieved students in October-November 1905 through the Carlyle and Lyon Circulars, followed a little later by the Risley Circular. Students tainted with Swadeshi were to be taught a lesson by their rustication from their institutions. In the first few weeks more than 300 students were thus expelled. A distinguished headmaster in East Bengal — Kaliprasanna Dasgupta — was removed from his post.

History has recorded a prompt response to the gauntlet thrown down by the British rulers.

As early as August 1905, an anticipation of the attack led to the creation of a Fund by Bipinchandra Pal and S. K. Mullick. In September an Appeal was issued for the boycott of university examinations in the name of some of its distinguished students — Radhakumud Mukherji, Rabindranarayan Ghose, Nripendrachandra Banerji, the Eshan scholar Benoykumar Sarkar. On November 4, 1905, Sachindraprasad Bose started the Anti-Circular Society as a reply to the Carlyle Circular. He and Ramakanta Roy proceeded to Rangpur and set up there the first National School (November 8). Calcutta was having almost every day students’ gatherings in the grounds of the Field and Academy Club and in the Goldighi. On November 9, Sobodhchandra Mallik promised a donation of 1 lakh of rupees for national education. His grateful people dubbed him with the honorific title of Raja in a meeting on November 9, at the ‘Panti’ fields. Within the next few days came an offer of five lakhs from Brajendrakishore Raychaudhuri, the zamindar of Gauripur, conveyed through Monomohan Bhattacharya who was intimate with Satischandra. A little later, Suryakanta Acharya Chaudhuri, Mymensingh zamindar, gifted two and a half lakhs of rupees. We may regard these three princely gifts as the financial pillars of the coming National Council of Education.

We are told that an eminent national leader, Ashutosh Chaudhuri, was overwhelmed with emotion in the students’ gathering on 11 November 1905. On the 14th November, he summoned a special meeting of distinguished leaders. On the 16th, at the meeting called by him was set up a Provisional Committee which was entrusted with the task of arranging the introduction of a scheme for national education. The Moderate leaders who were present on the day’s meeting at once marked the occasion by securing a withdrawal of the appeal for the boycott of examinations. This made apparent an intention to keep both options open. That the Extremists did not like this was
made obvious by two public meetings (November 24 and 26) addressed by Bipinchandra Pal and Leakeat Husain. It was obvious that there was already a cleavage within the National Education movement.

The leaders met again on December 10. But the outcome was only further delay: a Committee of Ways and Means was set up to devise a practical plan. From the beginning the leaders were moving in a slow mysterious fashion; perhaps this is the tempo suited to 'Leaders'. The third and final meeting came full 92 days later on 11 March 1906. The National Council of Education was set up at long last. And year after year, this date is observed as the anniversary of the Council, rightly perhaps.

IV
The five elements I enumerated in a previous section as the manifestation of our 19th century renaissance thought were all duly incorporated in the declaration of the National Council, though a carping critic may comment that mass education did not get its due emphasis.

Satischandra Mukherji proclaimed that education must be made attractive, easily intelligible, realistic, less time-consuming than the prevalent system. It was announced that National Education would stand on its own legs in a free and independent style without any direct confrontation against the existing structure. Another 'influence' of the Moderate leadership?

A sort of a split appeared within the National Council very shortly after. The majority wanted a three-dimensional instruction — literary-scientific-technical.

In the opinion of the minority, this was too ambitious a scheme. We must pick up the most necessary task. All energy must be devoted to the most immediate task before the country: technological education; a sprinkling of science teaching has of course to be added.

On 26 July 1906 the split materialised. The minority set up its own institution — the Organization Committee for Technical Education. Its chief patron was the wealthy Taraknath Palit. It was with his money that the Bengal Technical Institute was set up in his house at 92 Upper Circular Road, with Pramathanath Bose as the first principal. The renowned Jadavpur College of Engineering is the direct off-spring of this Institute.

On the other hand, the majority had proceeded to set up its National School and College to impart the three-dimensional education. The first principal was the great Aurobindo Ghose himself. For
the first couple of years or so, the director was Satischandra Mukherji. The legitimate heir of the ‘three-dimensional’ education is the present Jadavpur University.

Apart from the difference in the content of the education to be imparted, were there other factors at play behind the split? There are indications in some of the contemporary letters (written by Nareshchandra Sengupta etc.) and the diaries of Hemendraprasad Ghose that some prominent workers in the field were kept out of the National Council. The list did not include some prominent names such as Krishnakumar Mitra (the editor of the Sanjibani, who started the first school in Calcutta for rusticated students), Sachindraprasad Bose (the founder of the Anti-Circular Society), Prankrishna Acharya etc. Was it an accident that some at least of those left out happened to be Brahma by faith?

My own teacher, Haranchandra Chakladar, gave us an explanation in his essay in the National Council Golden Jubilee Volume. Apparently, there was apart from the difference on the content of education a divergence on the issue of religious instruction. The Brahmoss and their sympathisers apprehended that the National Council would develop a leaning towards Hindu orthodoxy which would gather strength more and more. It is significant that Rabindranath Tagore became more and more aloof. There was possibly some truth behind the apprehension. Undoubtedly Satischandra, who was the director at the beginning, did lean heavily towards religious orthodoxy; he even retired after a time from the mundane life around. The declared aim of his Bhagabat Chatuspathi was ‘full education in Hindu life, culture, and conduct’. The Dawn Magazine had as one of its aims ‘the special study of Hindu life, thought, and religion’. The friend of Satischandra, Birdwood wrote in his letter that he meant India to be a ‘Hindu India’ which must cultivate its own heritage of spiritual wealth. The Sandhya talked about the cultivation of ‘Aryan’ culture. And the foundation document of the National Council itself proposed instruction in religion.

Perhaps in all this there was not much to worry about. Of course Brajendrakishore Raychaudhuri laid down as a condition of his gift that a tenth of the annual interest must be spent in the religious education of Hindu students; arrangements were made accordingly. A later donation instituted a special prize for proficiency in Geeta studies. Hindu students were required to appear at an examination in religion. But the Council was ready to provide instruction in other
faiths, provided donations were forthcoming for the purpose. Probably the votaries of minority religions had not the resources needed for the purpose. Or, they might have lacked the necessary zeal. Some perhaps inclined to the belief that it was irrational to mix up religious belief with a course of educational program.

V
The stream of National Education thus flowed on in two currents. In Bowbazar the National School and College tried to steer a 'three-dimensional' educational scheme. And at 92 Upper Circular Road (the later home of the Calcutta University Science College), the Bengal Technical Institute ran what may be called 'one and a half dimensional' course (technology and some science).

In the Bengal National College, Aurobindo Ghose was the principal in the first year; he resigned to plunge in active politics. His task was taken over by Satischandra Mukherji, who withdrew later on for purposes unknown, drawn perhaps by mystic faith. Very able teachers had gathered round the college among whom were Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar, the well-known patriot; Drarmanand Kosambi (the father of the famous scholar, Kosambi of our times); Radhakumud Mukherji; Rabindranarayan Ghose; Benoykumar Sarkar; Haranchandra Chakladar.

Unfortunately however, the in-flow of students began very soon to dry up. This is proved by the periodical reports of the Council. The idea of a National University proved to be a mirage. Even during the stormy turmoil of the Non-cooperation Movement, the crowd of students did not turn to the National Council.

On the other hand, the Bengal Technical Institute was fairly successful. Though Benoykumar Sarkar ridiculed it as a 'mistri-making workshop', it seemed that a narrower path had some advantages. Clearly, people were more eager for a practical training in technique, for real needs. The scheme for a wider education might very well have seemed then to be a distant dusky ideal. And, technical training then was not easily avoidable elsewhere.

Pressure of circumstances like the lack of available space led in 1910 the two sections of the original National Council to come together at 92 Upper Circular Road, under a 'united' National Council as an umbrella as it were. The main work continued to be 'mistri-making'; but along it was set up a number of professorial chairs, some
courses of lectures, a certain amount of research; students were also to be sent abroad for higher education.

It must be admitted that the high hopes of 1906 had faded out. The 'fading out' is however applicable to very many aspects of our entire Swadeshi Movement. What were the reasons for the frustration in the particular case of the National Council?

A cruel hard truth has to be mentioned first. The 'National' degree had no market value; it could not provide poverty-stricken Bengalis any employment. The technical training certificate had more worth, being unavailable elsewhere. But there was a pitfall even here. Great hopes had arisen in Swadeshi days of a big industrial growth with very many jobs in the new industry. Unfortunately, there was little progress in the industrial sphere as well.

A second fact was that our mammoth Indian-owned colleges had not responded to the call of the National Council of Education. There were great expectations that these colleges with their host of students would gather the new standard. They did not however break the magic spell of the 'slave-camp'.

A little later, some drastic changes appeared in the University itself, the 'slave-camp' divided in 1905. The lead was taken by Ashutosh Mukherji, who had not linked himself with the National Council movement. His own cherished dream was to transform the University itself, and a magnetic personality was his instrument in the task. Under his leadership, the University was no longer an organ for examinations; he tacked on to it an institution of higher postgraduate teaching centre. Special measures were introduced for the cultivation of Bengali and other Indian languages. Subjects like history were revised and expanded. The first real Science College in India was founded with the collection of princely donations from Taraknath Palit and Rasbehari Ghose. The paths of original research opened out. Great scholars were invited to adorn the professorial chairs. It was made even possible to free the University from the shackles of government control. The massive waves of Non-cooperation failed to shake the new edifice of the University.

The achievements of Ashutosh Mukherji were of course a little later in date. For, the currents of National Education were drying up even by 1910. Did one reason lie in the conservation of the Council leaders themselves? When the student upsurge came in 1906, the National Council did not act with sufficient daring, perhaps because of the ultra-caution of the Moderates. When the favourable
moment passes away, it is only natural that the setback cannot be retrieved and success eludes our grasp. Many a new National School in the districts came under the spell of the Extremists and did not even seek affiliation from the Council. They were conducted by the local people, or by the famous revolutionary societies in East Bengal; these roused the anxieties of the alien Government (which did not bother over-much about the National Council). The Council leaders tried even to ban politics in the district schools and the attempt was promptly ridiculed by Aurobindo Ghose as a ‘Swadeshi Risley Circular’. Was this the reason for Aswinikumar Datta’s decision to keep his celebrated Brajamohan College out of the umbrella of the National Council?

In this context, one may refer to the later criticism by the veteran revolutionary, Hemchandra Kanungo, of the frailties of National Council of Education. Of course Hemchandra was a master of sharp invectives, sparing no one; his comments were not contemporary and much of an after-thought. Yet one can hardly dismiss off-hand a penetrative critic like him. Hemchandra held that the National Education of the epoch achieved nothing very new and could not grasp the basic needs of our country; it was very much an imitation of the system already prevalent; it unduly glorified our past heritage; the vernacular medium was almost totally neglected. Unpalatable comments no doubt, but surely we cannot brush his criticism away in any necessary introspection of our past.

VI

Yet, in history, ideals are always dimmed under the pressure of objective circumstances. Expectations are bound to slide down to a lower key. The National Council of Education failed to achieve very many things. To deny this would be a travesty of the truth. But, by what reasoning can we brush off what was achieved in those days? Can we in justice forget the heroic daring struggle to keep alive an independent institution outside the control of our foreign rulers? The hard fight to awaken the people’s self-respect? The success, albeit partial, which was achieved? To keep alive, year after year, the flame of technical education? The endless sacrifices of the common workers in the cause, even though we may ignore the leaders? Are all these mere nothings? And can History forget this?

Today we recall the memory of a band of heroic teachers and students who showed the strength of giving up their worldly interests.
(how many of us can do this?) We remember those who could uphold at least the truncated form of the ideals of National Education, who through manifold privations could to some extent enrich the realm of knowledge. In spite of all shortcoming, they are immortals in History. The real question is today — can the Jadavpur University live up to such noble heritage? If it cannot, surely the Anniversary celebration becomes meaningless.

For the sake of completing the story, I shall try to put within a small compass the long annals after 1910. With Taraknath Palit turning away, the National Council and its different segments found (October 1912) a new shelter at Panahabate Villa in Maniktala. In 1917, the Bengal National College was forced to assume an attenuated form under the name Bengal National Academy. Even this had to be abandoned. What remained was the Bengal Technical Institute. Survival of this also would have been difficult but for Rasbehari Ghose's promise of the handsome gift of 12 lakhs of rupees (1921). This was indeed the turn of the tide. In 1922, the Calcutta Corporation made available in the then suburban area as much as one hundred bighas of land to the institute to house its workshops and residences. On the 16th Anniversary of the National Council, the foundation was laid on this site of the Aurobindo-Bhavan which is still the core of the complex of our entire Institution. In 1924, the Institute moved at last to its own home on its own grounds. An annual grant from the Corporation materialised in 1927 — with the assistance of the historian Narendranath Laha. Further stretches of land were made available by the Corporation in 1929. In the previous year, the Technical Institute had been renamed as the Jadavpur College of Engineering and Technology. Even since 1910 however a supervision over the institute had been vested in the National Council of Education. Meanwhile, the Engineering College had earned a reputation all over the country; its degrees were being recognised even by the government; some foreign universities had started a process of recognition as well. With the advent of our Independence, the chance at last came for the realisation of the original plans of the National Council of Education. And the foundation of the Jadavpur University in 1955 may be said to have embodied the first dreams.
VII
I shall end this survey by raising with your permission a few questions and problems.

The National Council of Education still exists. It has been given its own weightage in the organisational structure of the new University. Is it not possible and desirable to expand its body? Very many people regard it as a closed circle, an oligarchy. The idea seems to have been fostered in the early days. To expand an organisation is of course risky. Is it not equally risky to persist in the policy of the closed door?

If the Jadavpur University is the bearer of the ideal of the original three-dimensional education, does it not signify an equal status for each of the three Faculties? In my own time at least, one would detect a trend of the more prestigious Engineering wing extending its sway all over the University itself.

At the inception of the University could be seen a healthy desire for closer contacts and interlinkings in instruction. There was a pleasant practice styled General Knowledge — in which Arts students could pick up some science and Science and Engineering boys could be given some rudiments of history and literature. Is it true that such exchanges have now fallen into disuse. If correct, this is surely a backward slide.

Lastly, what has happened to the Bengali medium? I do not believe that even now it is not possible to teach everything in Bengali. How could Satyendranath Bose teach in Bengali higher mathematics? If foreign terms are unavoidable, they could very well be written in the Bengali script. The symbols of science have already become current in an international form. The peculiarity of a language lies in its verbs, pronouns, some adjectives, the structure of sentences. Foreign nouns may easily be borrowed in our script of course. It is still necessary for us to learn English as the gate to the treasury of knowledge — but such a tool of necessity is not identical with a medium of instruction. I remember that in the first draft rules of our University it was stipulated that English would be retained, 'pending the introduction of Bengali as the medium'. Will 'pending' remain as 'pending' for ever? Why should non-Bengali students be not taught a simple 'Basic' Bengali? Their knowledge of English is as rudimentary as in the case of the Bengalis. Would we expect in Paris for instance a medium of English, Bengali, Hindi? It is true that textbooks are lacking in Bengali, but as soon as Bengali is established as
the medium, books would be forthcoming, perhaps in torrents. Other objections are raised, but as a matter of course one cannot learn to swim without first taking to the waters. The initial daring shown by the National Council of Education must not be allowed to remain for ever a dream.

The materials of this Essay come mainly from three books:
1. *Golden Jubilee Volume of the National Council of Education;*
2. *Origin of the National Education Movement* by Haridas and Uma Mukherji;

The arrangement and comments are of course my own.