Autobiography of an Unknown Indian

Within the last few months, Mr. Nirad Chaudhuri’s autobiography has earned a considerable reputation with readers here and abroad and the controversy between admirers and critics has resounded in many quarters. Naturally I could not resist the temptation of reading the volume twice from cover to cover. Undoubtedly this is in many ways a most remarkable book.

First of all, there is the glow in the author’s language, its pleasant readability, the robustness in expression. Some think that the English of Mr. Chaudhuri is not quite the English of today. Such criticism, I believe, is totally inappropriate. If a writer can reach out to his readers in his own way, in a sharp and clear manner, his style is thereby justified, however much it differs from the usual standards. Our author has indeed a distinctive style and he can touch his readers effectively, even overwhelm them.

We must also regard as extraordinary the impress of original thinking which marks this work. It has given out opinions fearlessly, not refraining from hitting fiercely at established conventions; it has great disdain for “patriotic” adulation and complacency, dragging into the light of day many abuses accumulated in our social life. Too often we deceive ourselves with self-praise and swim in the tide of “platitudes”; it is better therefore to respect the lashes of merciless criticism. Mr. Chaudhuri is a master in not mere analysis, but in sheer description as well. I would like to mention in this connection three of his highly enjoyable chapters — “Torch Race of the Indian Renaissance”, “Calcutta”, and “Initiation into Scholarship”.

Apart from characteristic language and ideas, the reader is attracted also by the revelation of the author’s striking personality. To the western world, Mr. Chaudhuri might indeed be “an unknown Indian”; but surely to the educated Bengalis, his learning, musical knowledge, military studies are not really unfamiliar. Yet, apart from the circle
of friends, readers who do not know him personally would now have
the experience of an unique personality which cannot easily be shaken
off. Personality arouse interest always, and draws to itself an unfail-
ing public interest. If the object of an autobiography is the revelation
of a self, the aim has been fully attained and a powerful intellect has
been embodied in the written word.

Unfortunately, Mr Chaudhuri's objective is much more ambitious.
He has proclaimed loudly that his book is not a string of the events
of his life and that he is discussing not the experience of an individ-
ual but the history of his people. With infinite labour and effort, he
is trying to emancipate us from the pall of ignorance. He lays down
the claim that his opinions are firm conclusions, free from all error
(pp. 129, 465, 466, 513).

But well-written, original and distinctive opinions do not necessarily
thereby turn out to be firm truths. Truth is measured, not by an
apparently dazzling display but by a conformity to the reality of
things. Of course, differences of opinion are natural, perhaps unavoid-
able. But since our author has preferred verbal propaganda to factual
proofs, the present critic is constrained to observe that Mr Chaudhuri's
views are partial, one-sided and largely fanciful. The vindication of
the Autobiography lies in its self-revelation, rather than in any estab-
lishment of significant historical conclusions.

The keynote of the entire volume is just this — the culture and
civilisation of Bengal, nay India, our entire national life is on the
downgrade, with no signs at all of any regeneration. Imitating Speng-
ler's grim vision of Europe, our author sees in his own country only
the dark shadow of decline and fall. Ruin is coming down on us, the
ground is slipping under our feet, all that is precious faces destruc-
tion today (pp. 48, 129). We are living in an age of real decadence,
manliness is at a discount, the ability to criticise has evaporated, signs
of decay are advancing on all hands (pp. 334, 364, 444, 469).
According to our author, this fall is not the departure of the modern
world from some traditional golden age. The decadence in our society
has revealed itself since only 1919, and Calcutta after 1930 has left
him dissatisfied (pp. 259, 403). The blight which descended on Bengal
even during Mr Chaudhuri's youth is but a feretaste of the recent
resurgence of barbarism in modern India (pp. 186, 187). The decline
in effect is only in the contrast with the 19th century "reawakening"
which attained its full glory in the five decades after 1860 (p. 221).

Is not such an evaluation of the "renaissance" in the 19th century
an exaggerated picture? Recent discussions in Bengal have thrown much light on the drawbacks in the achievement of our middle classes in the British days. To raise our "awakening" under the imperialist auspices of a semi-colony, the stirrings of life under the wings of a permanent landlord settlement, to the level of the European renaissance is largely futile. Our renaissance was hindered at every step by its divorce from the masses, by Hindu-Muslim differences, by inherent contradictions. The portrait of a cultured Bengali gentleman which the author presents from the pages of Bankimchandra's *Rajani* provokes today a smile rather than respect. Can we find in it any signs of the defiant spirit in Europe of the 15th or the 16th century? Mr Chaudhuri, like our 19th century cultural leaders has equated the Indian Mutiny with traditional reaction. The virile side of the revolt, grasped by the vision of Marx, escapes his attention.

Of course, our renaissance, though not of equal status with the European, is the undeniable inspiration of our modern national life. Only we have to identify here culture with the thought currents of the educated gentle folk. Even as we accept the cultural heritage from Rammohan to Rabindranath, we cannot shut our eyes to its lack of strength, inner contradictions, limited extent, and excellence in only a partial way. If we ignore the limitations of our 19th century achievements, we are driven into the arms of certain platitudes.

Our author, in overemphasising the Bengal renaissance, has drawn a picture of recent decadence which again is partial and distorted. To hold that nothing new has lifted its head in India in the last generation is just propaganda, a mere assertion of faith. The mass-awakening under Gandhiji; the selfless death-daring campaign of the revolutionaries; the agitation of the workers and peasants; the popular struggle against imperialism — all seem to lie beyond Mr Chaudhuri's concept of culture and civilisation, all apparently are no more to him than signs of national degeneration. We find the author bowing down in respect to the strength of character in the educated gentry of the 19th century. By what arguments however can we ignore the struggle and effort of very many men in modern times? Do not our experiences reveal modern instances of sacrificing of self for the sake of ideals, the voluntary acceptance of suffering with endless courage, mutual cooperation, patient perseverance, building of organisational strength? Is the absence of all this so very obvious today? Mr Chaudhuri's experience may very well have escaped all such things, but then that is his own misfortune, not that of his people. And, if we equate cul-
ture with the walled-up kingdom of literature and thought alone—
even then can we deny the development of Bengal’s literature and
India’s thought in the last quarter-century? National culture is not
synonymous with a few great names alone—it is expressed as well
in the discussions on literature and art, science and history, in the
emergence of new ideology.

Mr Chaudhuri has pointed out in his preface that his aim is to as-
certain the general rule, not the exceptions to it. One may ask how-
ever whether what affects big chunks of the people is merely the
exception, not the rule. We need not inflate the importance of much
that has happened within the last two or three decades, but surely it
is improper to pass over the recent manifestations of life and vitality
in our country.

True, the scenes of mental, moral and practical decadence which
have pained our author are largely present today. But does not this
apply mainly to certain strata and classes, and not to the people as a
whole? Mr Chaudhuri has confined his gaze to the upper stratum of
society. Had he extended his vision like a true humanist, he would
have observed that the decline of certain categories is not equivalent
with the fall of the entire nation. But then this raises the question of
a point of view, of different ways of looking at history.

Mr Chaudhuri’s contempt and distaste for the crowd is significant.
Not merely does he dislike the concourse of people (p. 260). In early
youth he dreamed of the revolution in terms of a disciplined military
rising, not as a people’s upsurge (p. 249). He was even offended with
the popular outbursts of the Gandhian era (p. 407). He did master
the history of the French Revolution in his student days, but it seems
that like some traditional historians the masses appear to him as mere
canaille. It is not merely a matter of personal preference; Mr Chau-
dhuri brings this point of view in his history as well.

Our author proclaims the ideal of sticking to facts as the appro-
priate point of view in history. But he does not seem to be aware
that the pursuit of truth is not something which is always the selection
of the same kind of acts, that an ideal is not some abstract invariable
concept. He seems to suggest that the Greek historian Thucydides
was above all national or party spirit (p. 345), or that Bishop Stubbs
was untouched by any partisan feeling (p. 351). No historian today
would assert such claims. No one today would bow down to the arro-
gance of the French historian quoted more than once by Mr
Chaudhuri, who said that history itself spoke through him. Mr
Chaudhuri accepts the claim of some historians to have reached final truth, irrespective of country, period or class. But the claim itself is a mere reflex of a special set of conditions in the 19th century, when it was held that the state was above all group or class, and that intellectual pursuit was an eternal process unaffected by social environment. One need not disown the objective scientific approach to history, but the particular judgement of any historian is of course subject to challenge.

Mr Chaudhuri's historical conclusions must therefore submit to objective analysis. He has emphasised the influence of the anti-Islamic crusade behind Europe's expansion (p. 506); the much more powerful economic impulse which drew Europeans to America, which lay outside the pale of Islam, remains ignored. Echoing Spengler, Mr Chaudhuri apprehends that the entire European civilisation is on the brink of ruin (p. 341); the tide of vitality apparent today in so many parts of Europe escapes attention, for the bulk of Eurasia is alleged to have strayed from the truth — and this is a sample of the author's objective historical judgement. A "genius" like Churchill, appearing after the First World War, might have crushed the Indian national movement for ever (p. 320)! And, our only hope of survival in the future lies in revolving round the American sun (p. 510)! It is easy enough to understand the hopes and fears of an individual or a group. It is quite another thing to indulge in such wishful thinking as illustrations of objective historical analysis.

Misleading comments on our own history as well are not lacking. Mr Chaudhuri has assumed (p. 409) that the Hindu sense of community is a synonym for our national consciousness; by the same argument medieval Christian entity may be claimed to be the same thing as European nationalism. The Hindu public, it seems, regards gods and goddesses as within the range of bribes from humans (p. 450); is it not possible to bring the same charge against the mundane functioning of all religions? Hindu-Muslim antagonism seems natural to our author and he considers the "two-nations" theory as a historic fact (p. 231); but how can this be reconciled with his protest against the recent partition of Bengal as an unjust and unnatural measure? The national sentiment in the days of our renaissance appears reasonable and liberal to him, and yet he regards Gandhism as ancient reaction and a heap of superstitions (pp. 435, 441) which ruined the delicate breadth of vision in the former; he has missed the clear inner connection between the two ages representing only two
phases in the evolution of our middle class. Again and again we come across such recourses to individual fancies and subjective beliefs parading under the banner of a broad scientific devotion to facts.

In Mr Chaudhuri’s history, our renaissance has been over-exalted; the recent decadence of certain groups has been transformed into a fall of the entire nation; socialist thought and action in modern Europe has been totally ignored; and our own social evolution has assumed a most curious form. In the last chapter of the volume, he presents an original interpretation of the stream of Indian history, apparently in the footsteps of Toynbee this time.

Toynbee sought the difference between the diverse historical societies in the distinctions between primarily religious cultures. The European middle ages and modern times thus assume in his mind the shape of a single West-European Christian entity. His aim was to trace general formula governing the rise and fall of the specific societies. Mr Chaudhuri likewise detects three connected yet distinct “religious” civilisations in Indian history — Hindu, Islamic and European. They play their parts on the Indian stage, but the origin of each lies in an external upheaval — the Aryan conquests, the march of Islam, the European imperial expansion respectively. Thus, the impulse behind and the governing force in each of the three successive civilisations in India lay in a wider foreign culture. Sanskrit, Persian and English were the cultural vehicles of the three successive stages. From a purely cultural angle, the three civilisations in India have followed a downward path, but in the matter of political organisation, they have moved upwards. Yet in essence and nature, each of the three is not merely of alien origin but intrinsically foreign. The carriers of each civilisation were the foreign rulers and their companions and associates. The vast majority of the inhabitants could not assimilate the civilisation of their time, resulting in a constant strife between culture and barbarism. The barbarians are evidently the common multitude, the “internal proletariat” of Toynbee. Time has ruined each civilisation in turn — partly through the merciless pressure of the country’s climate and environment, in part through the weariness and loss of strength of the alien creators. The fall has not been engineered by the “barbarian” multitude, for relatively to the leaders of culture, the common folk are always inferior, and the country’s very atmosphere renders them more and more lifeless. Of course wherever a crisis threatens a civilisation, the ordinary people create much noise, but such disorders are like the braying of asses in lions’ skins. Resurgence
of civilisation can come only through the intervention of another foreign culture. The pattern of Indian history is roughly this in our author's view.

The attraction of a pattern lies in the ease with which it permits a sketch after one's own heart. Facts which do not fit in can simply be ignored, rendering the scrutiny of contradictory facts redundant. Our author thus dismisses out of court the very possibility of the origin of Indian civilisation in the interaction between external influence and internal conditions. The Aryan migration occurred in many lands; it is no small wonder that Mr Chaudhuri's Hindu civilisation is branded as alien, while to Toynbee the Aryan impact ceases to be a foreign entity in the so-called Hellenic, West European, East European or Iranian societies. It is indeed startling to hold that the Vedic and the subsequent Hindu cultures, literatures, cults, philosophies, languages — all originated in an impact from outside, while their relation with the soil and the people of the land continued to be merely that of conflict. Mr Chaudhuri has not explained what foreign impact led to the entire culture of Buddhism. The external impulses in his theory remind us of the First Cause in an explanation of the universe. In point of fact, however, the Indo-Aryan society's dependence on the external world was most tenuous. The links in Islamic India with religion and law abroad are more apparent, but even Toynbee has refrained from lumping all Muslim communities in one single Islamic society. If we find the true determinants of medieval Indian civilisation in pure Islamic religion, language, or social practice, there would remain no necessity to distinguish India of that epoch from its contemporary Middle East or from North Africa or South-East Europe. To dismiss in this fashion the medieval co-existence in India of the Hindu and Muslim religions, and their mutual influence, is passing strange.

The concept of an Indian civilisation covering Hindu and Muslim periods alike and its natural evolution in time is certainly not weaker in any way to our author's dictum about two specifically different societies — Hindu and Muslim. The way of life of the masses, the village organisation, the social structure remained indeed largely the same throughout the ages. Again, if we admit that big economic changes may transform the shape of society, we are justified in supposing that the age-old Indian society was breaking down under the pressure of British rule, leading to the beginning of a new Indian society and culture. Mr Chaudhuri's doctrine of the three distinct suc-
cessive civilisations in India may then turn out to be a mere *tour de force*.

It seems however that the interpretation of Indian history is after all a subsidiary matter in this book. It rises from a wish to clothe in scientific form an intense subjective emotion. The author in his search after a viable ideal in his early youth linked himself with a specific thought-world, the component native element in which was a coloured vision of the awakening in Bengal, while its foreign counterpart and framework happened to lie in an old partial view of European culture. That world has been almost shattered by the hard impact of historic reality — the exponents of our renaissance are exhausted and depressed today, and familiar Europe has been thrown into turmoil by the advent of newer ideas. A sense of *fin de siecle* has overtaken our author. Since the common people appear to Mr Chaudhuri to be no more than an ignorant barbaric multitude, he finds no ray of hope in either India or Europe. It is only in capitalist America therefore that he finds inevitably the vital spirit which fits in with his own pre-conceptions. He seems thus to wait for American capitalism to step in, perhaps as the only hope for India's rejuvenation. And this is the perspective in which is built up his philosophy of history. If we can ascribe the impetus behind all civilisation in India to some foreign source, it might even seem natural to look to the coming of America as the saviour. Yet, America is after all the child of European civilisation. Consequently the author is constrained to admit that in reality the third or Indo-European civilisation is still not quite exhausted; we are witnessing as it were an ebb and flow within its limits. Our lost health will possibly revive through an American injection. All hope need not be given up.

No one will grudge Mr Chaudhuri seeking his own consolation. But the path of history is indeed devious. And in all probability, his firm conclusions will break down in the process of its unfolding.
Problems of Indian Historiography

We meet today under the shadow of gloom cast by the death of Professor Mohammad Habib and pay our tribute of respect to his memory.

It is customary for a newly-elected president to express his own unworthiness before the assembly he is going to address. In my case, it will be not merely the observance of a ritualistic convention, for I have been astonished beyond measure by the summons which has called me up from my seclusion and I still fail to understand the reason for this year's totally unexpected choice by the authorities of the Indian History Congress. I have never been intimately connected with the Congress; though I happened to be one of its local secretaries as early as 1939, I have so far attended only three sessions in the course of a whole generation. My bare half-a-dozen research papers on 18th century British Indian records were published as far back as the thirties and have by now, I suppose, reached oblivion. In the fifties I took part in editing four historical volumes which attracted little attention. Of course I have written scores of historical reviews and articles, but mostly in my own language unfamiliar to the majority in the world of scholarship. I have been fairly successful as a teacher for four decades, but I did not know that this is any claim to the chair of a gathering like this.

Indeed the only reason for the great distinction brought to me seems to be the love and affection of my young friends and pupils who must have persuaded the others to whom I have been an outsider. Whatever the explanation might be, my heartfelt thanks go out to the executive and members of the Indian History Congress, and I assure you that the honour at the fag-end of my life has indeed been overwhelming. I can only hope that the experiment will not be a dismal failure.

The venue of our session, Muzaffarpur, recalls to me pleasant memories of the second decade of the century when I stayed here off and on with my father, a government officer. A little dreamy town nestling on the river bank with bungalows, bits of crowded areas, orchards and open spaces must have in the fifty years since grown into a veritable city which has today even a university centred on it. My links with Bihar are strong, our family was domiciled here; it was in Patna that my elder brother lived, taught, and died. I am glad to know that Bihar today is a promising nursery of young historians.

I regret I have been extremely unwell for the last few months, and thus prevented from concentrating on my task and writing something worthy of the occasion. It has been beyond my strength to survey the recent literature,
to present any study in depth, to examine adequately some current approach. In particular, I must apologise to the younger historians for not coming out, as some of them might have expected, with a Marxian critique of Indian history or any part of it. I have never felt myself competent to offer such a review, and indeed our evidence (and perhaps our mastery of Marxism) is still insufficient for the purpose. Marxian historical studies are also not that plentiful and comprehensive even in other lands. And though the Marxian approach does peep out today in very many historical writings, sometimes it takes on a dogmatic form against which we have to guard for the sake of scientific Marxism itself.

I crave your indulgence for holding up here a mere string of stray random thoughts, with no higher aim than sharing views, raising questions, encouraging rethinking, criticising assumptions. In a sense, this is no unworthy aim. History after all is a search after truth, an approximation rather than a final formulation. One of its main objects is to rouse intellectual curiosity. "History is a science still in travail", said Marc Bloch, "It is a thing in movement." He added: "The incomplete, if it is perpetually straining to realise itself, is quite as enticing as the most perfect success."

FOR SOME years now attempts at a logical periodisation of Indian history have become noticeable. This is a worthwhile endeavour, but have we really succeeded? Is there an agreed scheme, and are there reasons valid enough to sustain it?

In our innocent younger days, Indian history was divided neatly into the Hindu, Muslim and British periods. This was a simple political division, implying the predominance in each period of the corresponding set of rules. Predominance, not exclusive rule— for the Hindu period contained certain non-Hindu chiefs, the Muslim epoch covered a number of Hindu states and the first European settlements, and the British sway did not exclude the 'native' princely India.

As we grew older and wiser, the traditional division appeared more and more unscientific. Can periodisation, we asked, follow simple political, even communal, labels? Are not the real dividing lines in the history of a country based rather on social and material evolution, independent of the accidents of the race or religion of the rulers? We therefore turned, perhaps naturally, to the established nomenclature in European history— ancient, medieval, modern.

There was a consequent difficulty. The three-fold division in Europe has a firm solidity. Ancient Europe was conterminous with the classical Graeco-Roman culture and marked by the rise, growth and decay of the truest slave society in the annals of civilisation. Medieval Europe was the story of the domination of the Catholic Christian
Church accompanied by the origin, ascendancy and decline of feudal society. Modern Europe was ushered in by the series of great transitional changes like the Renaissance, the Reformation, or Europe's discovery of the world, along with the advent, flowering and decadence of capitalist society. Is there any comparable parallel in the stages of our history? Do the European terms convey in the Indian context similar connotations?

Of course, any history can be divided for convenience into ancient, medieval and modern — implying thereby nothing more than antiquity, an intervening period and modernity, in a purely relative sense. But do the classic terms indicate for India no real material-social entities?

Confusion is increased by our prevalent usage. In olden times, the Hindu period was supposed to extend from the earliest days to the end of the 12th century, the Muslim from that point to mid-18th century, and the British section started from this stage. We have not materially departed from these limits. A reference to the list of papers at our last session, grouped into the three main sections, will bear out the contention that the present dividing lines tend to coincide with the period limits of old tradition. But are there any scientific reasons for equating ancient India with the Hindu period, our middle ages with Muslim rule, and our modern history with British sway? Why have we then abandoned the old names?

Some have postulated in our earliest history a period of the Asiatic mode of production. But the reality of its concrete existence in India and its possible duration remain matters of sharp difference of opinion. Most scholars are now agreed that there was no true slave society in Indian antiquity. Slavery existed to some extent in some areas for some time, as it continued to do even in much later epochs. But slave labour was never here the main prop of production, which is the essential mark of a slave society. Historians like D. D. Kosambi and Ram Saran Sharma have sketched the rise of feudalism in India and the probable dates assigned to the rise are from the third to the eighth century which surely fall well without our usual limits for Ancient, not Medieval, India. And when did feudalism in our land pass away, if even now? Irfan Habib once told us that there is no sense in regarding Mughal India as feudal. Yet in recent 'modern' times, have we not often supposed that we were still under the shadow of at least a good deal of feudalism? What then was the exact reality of Indian feudalism, and what its limiting lines? And again, what are our
approximate dates for capitalism in India? Bipan Chandra's date for the commencement of our modernism, of India's gradual integration into the capitalist world in a subordinate colonial position, seems to be roughly mid-18th century. But this coincides with the advent of the British power, and is it not a direct consequence of British conquest?

Of course one can argue that terms like feudalism or capitalism do not cover at any time the entirety of the Indian scene, but are mere regional phases. Or, it can be maintained that the succession of dominant societies we see in Europe has not been repeated in India, that the western social models have often managed to coexist in our land. What then would remain of the successive material realities behind the three-fold division of Indian history into ancient, medieval and modern? And why do we still stick at the date-lines appropriate to the Hindu-Muslim-British periods to mark our new periodisation?

It is far from my intention to suggest a return to the traditional political periods of the past. I am merely pointing out the necessity of rethinking and thinking out appropriate and logically acceptable limits for the divisions we impose on our history. At present, I am afraid, we have only coined new high-sounding but misleading names for the three traditional periods of the past.

In this connection, has not the time come yet for devising additional sections in our Congress? Already we have a fourth section — on external non-Indian history. It is only proper to have a Pre-History Section in view of the rapidly extending evidences on our earliest times. And surely there is a case for a section on Post-British Independent India; foreign scholars at any rate are already working away at our contemporary history. Pre-History and Contemporary India may perhaps be still subsumed under our ancient and modern departments. But what about today's Pakistan? Do we regard it as forming part of our modern India, or do we relegate it to our non-Indian external section?

May I venture here on perhaps an irrellevant, if not impertinent thought? The History Congress still seems to many as one of the annual 'tamashas' in which we have been so prolific. Can it not be turned into something more active throughout the year? One way would be to organise groups of local members, perhaps in each university centre, with regular discussion meetings of their own and periodic reports to the centre. The membership dues may then be lowered, if the numbers rise as a result. Those attending the annual
session would perhaps have to pay more for the privilege, a delegate fee over and above the membership dues.

II
As a fashion perhaps, the study of Indian history begins normally with an assertion of India’s fundamental unity, and a review of the available source-material.

What exactly is ‘fundamental’ in India’s unity?
One can hardly speak of a national unity in the Indian past; nationhood, as in some other lands, is a recent phenomenon with us; it may be claimed that it is still in the making; it may even be argued that India is a congeries of nationalities with separate histories of their own; such nationalities may even go their separate ways in the future, however unfortunate this might be for our legitimate hopes of well-being, strength and advancement. Racial uniformity was never characteristic of India; multiplicity of races has marked the course of our annals. It could not be denied that political-administrative unification as a recent development and not a general feature of Indian history; the mighty empires which arose never unified the whole of what we know as India; their control over the entire land must have been uneven and incomplete; we often loosely assume that the Maurya, Gupta or the Mughal imperial power exercised the central authority familiar to us today. A common language hardly existed; the sway of any dominant priestly or court language could not have penetrated to the masses at large who made up the Indian people and clung to their own vernacular languages. Geographical entity is a relative and even elusive term; on the one hand, many lands taken usually as historical units do not possess such unity, just as natural boundaries for a country are naturally not quite common; on the other hand, geographical unity may easily cover a continental or subcontinental region the subdivisions of which can easily count as separate distinctive units in history by their own rights. Are we then driven to the position that the fundamental unity is only a historical convention, convenient and unavoidable perhaps but not objectively true?

The usual answer of course is that our unity is essentially cultural. This requires close thinking and analysis. Was our unity in the past then rooted in Hinduism, as medieval Europe was the unity of Christendom? Apart from the difficulty of defining Hinduism throughout the centuries and the existence of considerable groups of non-Hindus in ancient India, how was this religious unity of old affected by the
advent, spread and persistence of Islam in our country? Would we have to fall back on the two-nation theory, or should we claim that the Muslims were assimilated into Hindu India or, conversely, they were never a part of India at all? Does the recent emergence of Pakistan imply a modification of the thesis of our fundamental unity? How can we, again, uphold India's essential unity today and tomorrow on Hindu culture alone and indeed on any particular religion, since secularism is our proclaimed ideal? And if we turn to the concept of class-culture, how can we base in any period at all a fundamental unity on religion?

Would it be permissible to go so far as to say that the idea of the fundamental unity of India is not a closed static absolute notion, equally true in every period, independent of subjective approaches? Historical thinking, if it existed in our past, would surely have thought of unity in terms of a dynasty, locality, religious culture and community, or a common way of life round a religious outlook of course. Today we think of it in dynamic terms of a developing nation which is surely the heir of the past, but which is also in the process of realising itself, with perhaps an uncertain future as yet. Reality indeed is so baffling that many accepted concepts cannot capture it effectively.

The source-material for any particular history is however very much an objective factor, free from theoretical speculation. Comments here can only clarify the scope of the subject and emphasise certain approaches to it.

There was a time when our historians concentrated on official records — Hindu inscriptions, Muslim court-chronicles, British archives. I still remember the day when young researchers were discouraged from entering on wider fields. But such governmental or semigovernmental documents are not enough; one must learn to follow other traces as well of man’s activity, to harness multiple types of source-material. “The variety of historical evidence is nearly infinite.” “The deeper the research, the more the light of the evidence must converge from sources of many different kinds.” Thus Marc Bloch, whom I have just quoted, utilised in his medieval studies place names, nature of the soil, technique of cultivation, forms of settlement, old maps, modern aerial surveys, ancient tools, folk-lore, social ideas, social relations, economic formations — in addition to the available direct documents.

Apart from the sweeping search for such materials in every possible direction, the historian has to grapple with his source in a truly penetrating fashion. For, we do not observe the past directly but only
through the reports of the others who again can see only a part of
the truth. To quote Bloch again, no witness is reliable in "the abso-
lute sense", no document can be "equally reliable on all subjects". We
very often only paraphrase our documents, while what is necessary
is a "struggle" with them. "A document is a witness, and like most
witnesses it does not talk unless it is questioned." We must know what
questions to ask, as in a cross-examination, and remember that often
enough unintentional indirect admissions are more valuable than the
avowed testimony of the witness or the document.

Two difficulties about sources harass the Indian historian in a
special degree. Our early literary writings are of uncertain date, and
even the Arthasastra, I think, is suspect. Yet without a firm, at least
a fairly certain approximate dating, their historical value is impaired.
Chronology is the essential skeleton of any frame of history. We
cannot jump about in effect from century to century haphazardly in
the presentation of any development. What is meant by chronology
in this context is not the exact dating but a certainty about the seque-
rence of the literary records in the stream of time. Otherwise we are
left hanging in the mid-air as it were. Can anything be done by the
collective efforts of scholarly institutions, so that the individual writer
may use the relevant material with greater assurance? The second
handicap I am thinking of is the notorious lack of preservation of
relatively modern newspapers, journals, private papers, letters, etc.
together with the apathy of the authorities towards the collection,
housing, maintenance, micro-filming and so forth. Is it not almost
criminal to allow historical materials to perish, adding thereby to the
difficulties of posterity?

III
Within the domain of Ancient Indian History, a good deal of attention
has recently been drawn by the concept of the Asiatic society and the
problem of Indian feudalism. I am not competent to deal authorita-
tively with either, but a few points do occur to any thinking mind.

Do we always remember that, contrary to popular Marxism, Marx
himself did not give a categorical final answer to the question as to
what are the different social formations which can be identified in
history? What was fundamental in his conception was the passage
from the primitive classless society to civilised class-society and the
motion thence towards a civilised classless society of the future. The
actual stages or formations within class-society have however to be
determined concretely. Thus in the forties of the last century, Marx inclined to postulate only three broad types of class-society. In the fifties, he brought forward the idea of an additional mode of production — the Asiatic — an argument for the possible plurality of passages in class-society from the original primitivism, instead of a unilateral ladder of progress. The simplistic formula — primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism — must be explained as a propagandist popularisation only, emphasising the concept of the succession of social formations brought about by changes in the mode of production. We know that Marx and Engels themselves went on exploring the possibilities of variations to the last, like true social scientists.

The Asiatic society is not characterised chiefly by the absence of property in land and by centralised public works and irrigation as the 1853 articles on India by Marx suggested and as Wittfogel recently elaborated. In the *Formen* (1857-58), Marx emphasises rather "the self-sustaining unity of manufacture and agriculture" within the village community, explaining in this way the long duration of relative rural self-sufficiency. The rural authority may be "more despotic or more democratic according to circumstances, thereby dispensing with oriental despotism as a universal necessity. The "all-embracing unity from above appears as the higher or sole proprietor, the real communities only as hereditary possessors", thus not absolutely ruling out private landed property of some kind. Cities were "mere locations for external trade, or princely camps", proving consequently some amount of mercantile activity and aristocratic expenses.

Can a society with such broad characteristics be entirely ruled out for Ancient India? If so, why? Early British authorities did stress the existence of somewhat similar village communities, at least in a good many regions.

Are not terms like the Asiatic mode of production, again, merely generalised abstract models which at any given point may not exactly conform to an existing social formation? Is it not difficult to make even the more familiar and much more generally accepted feudal model coincide concretely with an actual society supposedly illustrating it? Ideal models are never reproduced in life meticulously, and yet it is difficult to discard them.

Does the Asiatic mode assert total changelessness, which of course is unreal even in the old Indian context? What the concept really indicated was rather a built-in resistance to change in the village com-
munities, and a consequent slowness in the pace of development. This is not the denial of any change at all, of possible change within a tradition, as Diptendra Bandyopadhyay pointed out in his study last year. Here we have an illustration of the well-known theory of uneven development, involving slow or quick change depending on objective material factors. Absolute changelessness is surely absurd in dialectical Marxism, but change is always relative.

Will not the total rejection of the Asiatic mode drive us to the substitute of 'Asiatic feudalism', since a true slave society did not materialise in India? This is the famous 'dilation' of the feudal idea, once popular in Soviet historiography, which leads to the application of the same label to all non-slave, non-capitalist class-societies from backward Africa to pre-revolutionary France. Would this 'dilated' feudalism be an improvement on the hypothesis of an Asiatic mode in India, flexible with concrete variations of course and slow-motion changes thrown in?

There is of course another way out of the difficulty. We may deny the universality of what is supposed to be the official Marxian pattern — primitive society, slavery, feudalism, capitalism (Irfan Habib's P.S.F.C.) — with the supposition that the Asiatic mode was only a passing phase in Marx's thought. Released from the 'universal chain of succession', the historian may then concentrate on concrete class struggles, plentiful enough in Indian history, without bothering about changing social models. This is however too easy a way out, at least for Marxians. The *Critique* of 1859 did present a picture in which at a certain stage of development production relations turn into fetters on productive forces and usher in a social revolution. Would not the assumption of a mere succession of class struggles without any climax, successive doses of exploitation and nothing more, tend to disown the fundamental Marxian concept above and make history go round and round the mulberry bush without any direction of progressive change?

As distinct from the nebulous Asiatic modes, feudalism is now a well-established concept in Indian history. Still, two questions persist. What are the limiting dates for our feudal times? And what was the distinctive nature of Indian feudalism?

Authoritative scholars trace the rise of our feudalism from the 3rd century, culminating round about the 8th. The question which crops up inevitably is how to characterise Indian society before the 3rd century, which I suppose was also a class society for a long stretch. What were the new 'feudal' characteristics coming in? Was the change in the structure of the village community so drastic as to mark a new
type of society? Was a class of intermediaries tending towards landlordship below the state power an essentially new factor? Can we be absolutely sure that no similar intermediaries existed in the past, even in an inchoate form? Are the available land-charters, for the benefit mostly of the reviving priesthood, an entirely new arrangement, or are they the earliest to survive? Could the state control, of the Mauryas for instance, have been so complete as to dispense with all intermediaries? Were the so-called bureaucrats paid fully in money with no hold on the local produce? Can the Arthasastra be taken as a literal picture for an entire epoch over a vast area? Was our feudalism a countrywide phenomenon? How long did it persist? Was the Muslim period feudal, and if not, what was it? Did the British encounter feudalism in India? And when did our feudalism actually pass away? You will see that any fool may ask any number of questions, which may still be difficult to answer.

As common traits of feudalism, distinct from the specific regional features, Marc Bloch mentioned—a dependent peasantry, slackened socio-economic intercourse, sluggish money circulation, regional mentality. The first of these four features is too wide, applicable perhaps to other societies as well; the other three are at best relative terms. Negatively, Bloch warned us that weak central authority, brutal exercise of power, administrative decentralisation, encroachment on government by aristocratic landlords are not necessarily feudalism. Obviously, therefore, much clarification is still needed about the concept of feudalism itself in India and even abroad.

Certainly my object is not to throw overboard the concept of Indian feudalism, just as I do not dismiss even the Asiatic mode in the Indian context. I am merely arguing for incisively clear, perhaps collective, sustained thinking on such controversial issues. In particular, one must be conscious that abstract social models are necessary for clarity of understanding, yet they are different from the actual concrete specific conditions at any given time or place.

IV
Passing to our Muslim Middle Ages, I shall draw your attention to two problems. Firstly, Hindu-Muslim relations. What was the general nature of Muslim rule in India? And what was the attitude of one community towards the other?

Many eminent Hindu scholars have inclined to the view that the Muslim rule was essentially a foreign government over us like the
British. Some nationalists thus talk of seven centuries of foreign domi-
nation in India. But how do we characterise a foreign subjection?

Did the Indian Mussulmans, settled here, have any other country
of their own? Did they send out their plunder abroad? Was the policy
of Muslim rulers governed by the interests or any foreign country?
Were not large numbers in our population coreligionists of our Muslim
kings? True, very many Muslim adventurers were of foreign extrac-
tion; but did they not in overwhelming numbers make India their new
home? True, Islam arose outside India and had universalist aims;
but in the similar case of Christianity's relation to Europe, do we think
of a foreign subjection? Many Muslims felt contempt for the 'kafirs';
but did not our Aryans cherish similar sentiments towards the original
Indians? And, how did our own Brahmins look on the Sudras?

The truth of our matter is that we cannot shake off the traditional
equation — Indian culture=Hindu culture — the equation which has
brought and still brings misfortune to us, in the wake of historical
misunderstanding.

It has been argued that the foreignness of Muslim rule is proved
by the perpetual oppression over the Hindus. As if native rulers, as
distinct from foreigners, do not go in for prolonged oppression, and
as if Hindu government also did not mean exploitation of the masses.
And can it be said that interference with religion is the sole or the
major proof of oppression?

Was Hindu-Muslim relationship a perpetual antagonism? Clinging
to such a conception, some Hindu historians have even found the
two-nation theory realistic.

Some well-meaning thinkers go to the other extreme of denying
Hindu-Muslim differences. This surely is a wrong reading of the
situation. The differences are real enough, and have persisted through
centuries. They have often led to clashes, and it is puerile to attribu-
te such in modern times to British intrigues alone. Tagore was
right to point out that even Satan cannot obtain a foothold unless
there is already, an opening, a chink in the body-politic.

But are differences, even occasional clashes, identical with perpetual
antagonism? Conflicts may flare up in certain regions, for a certain
time. But they would also die down. Amity between the two commu-
nities might, and did, prevail for long, perhaps even for greater periods
and larger areas. Under the pressure of common economic interests,
antagonism would fade out time and again, and even the differences
might retire backstage. There might be co-operation between the two-
communities at very many levels. There was sure to be much cultural interaction. Theological and priestly fulminations would often be ignored for reasons of wiser statecraft. Is this not a truer picture than a perpetual Hindu-Muslim warfare, a perennial Muslim oppression, a permanent unbridgeable cleavage in the Indian population?

I shall merely touch upon the second problem which occurred to me. The recent researches of Irfan Habib and other scholars are focusing attention on technological developments of the Sultanate and Mughal epochs. Have these changes a bearing on any transition in our land from medievalism to modernity?

Obviously, mere technological progress is not enough for a social transformation, as contemporary events amply demonstrate. The celebrated Chinese inventions did not after all usher in a new social order in China. A technological change may again have a limited zone of operation, leaving wider areas unaffected, if economic activity continues to be regional. In our pre-modern society, innovations could very well be hedged in, as our researchers themselves have pointed out, by the forces of resistance, and old modes of production were not exhausted yet. After all, the historic transition from medieval to modern Europe was not primarily a technological revolution, but due to fundamental socio-economic changes in a rare formidable combination. In the Marxian theory of social change, the ripening productive forces are surly not mere technological changes by themselves.

V

In the field of Modern India, I shall recapitulate a few points on the two topics about which I happen to have already written fairly extensively—19th century renaissance and the freedom movement.

The term ‘renaissance’ has often been challenged in our Indian setting. It is easy to argue that the European prototype of our awakening was a far wider and much more many-sided resurgence and that our movement had no such sweep, vitality or capacity to remake the world around. The political frame was also different, and instead of free and independent states we had to work out our intellectual-cultural revival within the strict limits of a foreign semicolonial subjection.

But is this difference sufficient to negate the concept of a renaissance in our land? After all, the European counterpart had its own blemishes. And awakening is always a relative term. Can we say honestly that our 18th century was not culturally a stagnant backwater from which we did manage to come out and escape in the 19th? If un-
critical adulation is wrong in history, is not a contemptuous rejection also unjustified?

The undoubted limitations of our 19th century ‘awakening’ lay in three directions: the failure of the educated community to understand the exploiting character of the alien British rule; the gulf between the ‘illuminated’ bhadralok and the toiling masses who lived in a world apart; and the obsession with Hindu traditions which helped to keep the men of our renaissance aloof from the Muslims. Quite apart from such limitations, however, our movement had a reality of its own, an impact on the country, a real contribution to make to modern Indian culture.

Was the 19th century awakening exclusive to Bengal? I am afraid scholars have paid too little attention to the intellectual-cultural life of other metropolitan areas like Bombay and Madras, and consequently our knowledge is imperfect. Bengal’s pre-eminence, again, was merely an earlier start due to the greater consolidation of the British influence, its deeper penetration and its wider orbit in these part, for the European impact was indeed a driving force behind our awakening.

Was our renaissance then largely of foreign inspiration? Patriotic sentiment would like of course to trace it to a revival of our own ancient heritage, like the renewal of the classical culture in the European movement. Recently David Kopf has inclined to the hypothesis that the origin of our renaissance was integrally connected with the orientalist activity of foreign scholars no doubt but working after all on the glorious Indian material. This is hardly convincing, and I think the true impulse lay not in a ‘rediscovery’ of the remote past, but the ‘discovery’ of the recent new which implied English education, western science, the liberal rational thought of Europe. This was in effect the opening of a closed door. Despite the sophisticated thinking of our later 19th century, this debt to the West was freely recognised by most of the Bengal renaissance.

Thus Rammohun Roy argued staunchly that contradictory religious texts have to be reconciled by our reasoning. He based his own interpretations of religion on the very modern concepts of social comfort, compassion, social texture—pointing irresistibly towards western rational humanism. When Rammohun or Vidyasagar quoted Hindu scriptures in defence of their projected reforms, their approach was clearly selective and the obvious original model was western liberalism. The Derozians openly flaunted the banner of western radicalism. Tagore wrote: “A wave of new ideas has come from
Europe and it has naturally had an impact on our minds. To deny that the resultant unrest has awakened our souls is to libel our spiritual faculties.” And again, “it was the magic touch of western culture that roused Bengal from its torpor.”

Was our renaissance a homogeneous united forward movement involving a series of intellectual efforts all of which command our equal pride? I have argued elsewhere about an inner clash and tension which I tried to present as a parallel to the celebrated differences in 19th century Russia between the westerners and the Slavophils. In our case, literary excellence and patriotic fervour were common to both trends, but they were sharply divided on broad social issues. Our westerners stood for social reform, a rationalism on western lines, humanism of a European type. The traditionalists evoked the ‘native’ pride in ancient glories, the consciousness of Hindu superiority, emotional religious faith.

The two conflicting trends did not however divide the men of our renaissance into two water-tight camps, for the two rival tendencies might appear in the same person. What is implied in the distinction is merely the existence of two abstract types of thinking, two logical concepts battling over the minds of men. An individual might oscillate from pole to pole, but the two clashing concepts were logically opposed and could not be reconciled in any ‘synthesis’. What appeared in very many individuals was not synthesis but ‘an interpenetration of opposites’, natural perhaps but hardly a logical resolution of the historic difference in approach between the two outlooks. The problem of priority is evaded in such a compromise as in all vaunted synthesis between faith and reason.

I still maintain that liberal westernism played historically a more significant role in our renaissance than traditional orientalism. Apart from being the real new impulse in the awakening, westernism is more akin to the future India of our dreams, though in today’s battle over the shape of India’s destiny, conservatism is still waging a stubborn rearguard action.

In passing, I would like to draw attention to areas in our 19th century cultural life still awaiting intensive study. Random examples would be — European journalism in relation to our educated people; the world of the Indian Christians; the social and intellectual life of the Muslims; the role of the Brahmos in the ‘awakening’; the evaluation of the essential outlook of Bankimchandra and Vivekananda; and the extent of the renaissance in the district areas.
I would now turn to a few problems in the history of our freedom movement.

Did not the British rule in India, contrary to earlier beliefs and official propaganda, come to encounter a whole series of popular resistance mainly in the countryside? The evidence is embedded in official records themselves, focused only in recent years by historians like S. B. Chaudhuri. The government theory was of course that the disturbances were sporadic and fomented by disgruntled dispossessed persons, leaving unanswered of course the query as to where such leaders found their followers and why. It would perhaps be too much to claim that these peasant troubles were precursors of our freedom struggle; but, negatively, do they not prove that, contrary to the British view, British rule was not automatically accepted as a providential blessing by large chunks of our common people? The widespread popular resistance to local oppressors, often enough British proteges themselves, incidentally raises it to a higher level than the wars of the country powers against the British intruders waged on the lines of traditional power politics.

The revolt of 1857 had obviously a still higher status. Inevitably it raises three crucial questions which I discussed in the centenary year. Was the revolt of 1857–58 a popular uprising which transcended the military ‘mutiny’? Can the movement be regarded as a national struggle? Was the social content of the upheaval a mere feudal reaction?

Is the view that the popular participation was essentially an outburst of anarchy let loose by the mutinous soldiery anything but a characterisation which can be applied to all popular revolts? The evidence clearly demonstrates the breadth and the depth of the resistance of the common people over an extended area — “the general nature of the rebellion” which led the British to a policy of terrorisation of the countryside, inspiring in its turn sullen silence, non-cooperation and hatred on the part of the villagers. “Natives of India do not really like us”, Bishop Heber had shrewdly confessed before, “and — if a fair opportunity be offered — would gladly avail themselves of it to rise against us.”

Does not the denial of the national label to the upheaval of 1857–58 imply a peculiarly narrow interpretation of the term ‘national’? The national ideal does go on changing from period to period. An all-India nation-state or a liberal democratic republic might very well have been beyond the grasp of 1857, but such a rigid conception of nationalism (countrywide unity or representative government) would
lead us to deny the label to ever so many revolts in western history which have always been regarded as national. A far-flung popular struggle for liberation from alien rule, a more or less unified struggle commanding the sympathy of large masses of the population, has undeniable claims to be regarded as national. Our historians are experts in detecting national manifestations in ever so many chapters of our older history. Confronted with the elemental upsurge of 1857, they lose their nerve and turn their back on the possibility.

But was not 1857–58, after all, “the dying groans of an obsolete aristocracy and centrifugal feudalism of the medieval age?” Was it not “a counter-revolution”? Events in 1857 could not very well shake off all feudal ideas of the time, but why should we equate ‘feudal’ with ‘reactionary’ at every point in the past? Our traditional culture about which we boast must have also carried the feudal tinge. Many feudal ideas could naturally be traced in the 1857 thinking, but could the general aim — the expulsion of foreign rule and the overthrow of oppression — be fairly condemned as feudal reaction? The feudal chiefs mostly kept aloof from the revolt leaning rather to the paramount power. The English-educated renaissance gentry mostly looked askance at the revolt, for they were captivated by their vision of the liberating role of the British, ignoring the alien domination, but was this not one of the admitted limitations affecting the entire ‘re-awakening’ process in the 19th century?

I shall not linger over the later aspects of our freedom movement because of the vastness of the subject. But one drawback cannot be passed over. The predominating Hindu tone, often unconscious, in the ranks of our nationalists had the most unfortunate consequences, since the majority community should have been more aware of the susceptibilities of the weaker groups. This was the surest way to alienate the non-Hindus, to foment unreasonable suspicions of a Hindu domination. Was this not a real handicap in a multi-community country? In this connection I have often been reminded of the plight of 19th century Hungary. There the dominant Magyar nationalists, in their fight against the foreign German rulers, raised the slogans of ‘Hungary — One and Indivisible’ and Magyar linguistic ascendancy, thus managing to forfeit the sympathy of the Slavic minority communities in a crucial period. The Hindu bias unhappily persists in even independent India and still constitutes a danger to our secular democratic nationhood in which men will stand as equals without any religious trappings, in which we will feel that “a man’s a man for a’ that.”
VI
Broadly speaking, history flows on three levels as it were. In the primary first stream, the object is to ascertain the solid 'facts' which are like the bricks of a building to discover true 'events', to settle the disputed dates or 'sequence'. This is a necessary task, but quite attainable if the evidence has not been lost.

Secondly, however, no study can stop with mere isolated facts. There must be a 'selection' from among diverse facts, as in most cases we cannot use all the factual material available; we have to choose what seems to be the important facts. Thus our second current must involve 'evaluation, concentrating on certain points, searching the possible links between events, tracing the connection between supposed causes and probable effects. The process of selection and evaluation at once raises the necessity for 'generalisation' which some historians scoff at, of course, at their own peril, as Toynbee demonstrated in a rejoinder to Fisher. Selection, evaluation, generalisation necessarily imply a point of view which accounts for the differences between historians broadly handling the same material. A point of view negates at least the claim of some historians that historical conclusions are like judicial verdicts, final truths, full objective reality.

In the third channel of historical discussion, different points of view can be subjected to scrutiny, for all points of view cannot be equally valid, each has to be in its turn evaluated on its own merit. While no final truth is attainable in history, relative truth is surely a reality within our grasp as in all, science. This search after truth, an "exhilarating never-ending search", is of course always an 'approximation'. Thus we may pass from one historical outlook to another through a rational exercise of the intellect. Primary facts must not be distorted, but one evaluation can certainly be higher, more comprehensive, more penetrating, more convincing than another. It is thus that we reach a philosophy of history, competing with other such philosophies.

The definitions of history spring really from such philosophical approaches, as when Ibn Khaldun said that the true historical reality lay in social transformation or the study of the changes in the social life of man, or when Kosambi described the historical process as "the presentation in chronological order of the successive changes in the means and relations of production."

Of late, of course, Marxism has gained much currency as a modern philosophy of history. I have already disclaimed any intention of ex-
pounding Marxism here. For one thing, I am not competent enough to do justice to the theme. For another, illness has at this juncture affected too deeply the energy needed for even attempting the task. I shall confine myself to a few comments meant primarily for the young Marxian researches with an apology and a plea for forgiveness. My point is that we must not make of Marxism a too facile simplistic formula, a dogma rather than a guide to action. Non-Marxians also may ponder over the intricacies of the theory instead of brushing it aside as too crude an approach.

Take the idea of class struggle for example. In any class-society, the interests of different classes naturally do not coincide, but rather run counter to each other. Class differences are real. But such differences do not and cannot always reach the same height of feeling or strength of expression, the same pitch of mutual conscious clash. That is to say, class struggles are acute or quiescent in accordance with objective circumstances, are indeed of different degrees of intensity according to a concrete process of evolution which has to be carefully studied. Uneven development is a rule here as well. The recognition of class war therefore is not enough; we must ascertain its actual character and sphere of influence at a given moment of history; general formulas cannot here replace objective knowledge. A general formulation, irrespective of the specific circumstances which have to be carefully studied, is not of much help in true historical analysis. And yet class struggle is not a figment but a persistent truth throughout the ages.

Or, the central thought in historical materialism on the shaping of the super-structure by the base. Here it is so easy to run into the distortion indicated by a mechanical view, turning the mental super-structure into a mere reflex of the economic base. Yet Marx himself recognised the relative autonomy of certain areas of the super-structure and its necessary time-lag in its adjustment to the mode of production. In the celebrated letters of Engels to his German disciples, we read how economic conditions do not produce an automatic cultural effect; how ideological spheres may sometimes react on the material mode of existence; how the super-structure in its turn may exercise an influence on historical struggle and development; how the thought of an epoch carries with it a certain heritage of the past and cannot start with a clean slate as it were; how the relatively more abstract ideologies exhibit a greater independence in the line of actual develop-
ments; how "men make their history themselves, only they do so in a given environment which conditions it."

Or, the Marxian concept of civil society. Civil society is the complex of private institutions and activities as distinct from the political society of official governmental-administrative organs. Civil society, when the term became fashionable in the 18th century before Marx, was often identified with the expanding bourgeois life of the period, still not identical with the political state structure of the age. But in the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels extended the conception to cover the forms of intercourse "at all previous historical stages" fundamentally rooted in the mode of production of the epoch concerned. "This civil society is the true source and theatre of all history", Marx said, and not the "high sounding dramas of princes and states." Again, civil society "embraces the whole commercial and industrial life of a given stage" and it is the study of this civil society which is of course the foundation of the materialistic conception of history. Antonio Gramsci has clarified the concept still further and explained that while 'political society' is made up of public governmental institutions, organs of command and even coercion which is the adjunct of state power, 'civil society' is the totality of private institutions and activities exercising persuasion over the community. He added that a new ruling class has to acquire a 'hegemony' over civil society in order to succeed and maintain its authority, and not merely think in terms of a capture of power of the political arena. It is gratifying to note that young Indian scholars like Asok Sen have recently turned their attention to the domain of civil society with Marxian interest, for obviously Indian history has in our own civil society a much richer field for more fruitful exploration than in traditional political history of "princes and states." The dictum — only state has a history — is a singularly barren idea in the historical studies in our land.

I must now end my long rambling repetitive discourse and thank you for the patience and the forbearance with which you have listened to me. Your ordeal at last is over now and you will be free to turn to more instructive addresses and more profitable discussions.
SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

I On the ‘Notes on the Bengal Renaissance’

The booklet, *Notes on the Bengal Renaissance*, originally published in 1946, has come under much criticism, naturally from academic circles. I myself would have materially recast it had I written it later with greater leisure. Yet, in the various reprints I have stuck to the original text for certain specific reasons.

This modest book after all made current the term ‘Bengal Renaissance’ (instead of the Renaissance in Bengal or the Bengali Renaissance etc.). This term has indeed passed into historical usage commonly accepted — ever since. Many of the sub-headings were introduced by my friend Mohan Kumaramangalam at the time of the original printing, and naturally I have not changed them, in his memory.

David Kopf handsomely acknowledged that here was the first attempt at a periodisation of the 19th century ‘awakening’ in Bengal.

The booklet was not meant for scholars or based on research, the material being gleaned from easily available secondary sources. It was intended for political workers on the left who needed a background survey of the cultural life of 19th century Bengal. It was not even an attempt at a Marxist analysis of events. A second intention was to provide a broad simple survey for students and general readers interested in the period. My modest claim is that these purposes have been served in however inadequate a fashion as it turned out to be.

One main criticism has been the analogy with the Italian Renaissance. But an analogy is only an analogy, not a replica. Renaissance, in a narrow sense implying some new cultural change, a sort of awakening, has often been used in European history itself. Thus we hear of the Twelfth Century renaissance, or even of a Carolingian renaissance — movements which are not confused with or compared to the Great Renaissance.

Again, the famous Italian Renaissance itself had its own limitations, known to the European historians. Instances are easily found in the
over-zealous glorification of the classical past and the contempt for mediæval thought. The Italian Renaissance was also very largely concerned with the intellectual elite.

I was aware of the limitations in our own Renaissance, though in the Notes in 1946 I omitted them, perhaps in a hasty over-simplification. In the very next decade, before the modern criticism set in, I emphasised these in several essays which are in reprints usually tacked on to the original booklet. The major limitations to the Bengal Renaissance in my opinion were three: (1) The majority of the representations of our awakening identified progress with the British rule, ignoring the fact that the British held us in the strait-jacket of semi-colonial subjection and imperialist exploitation. (ii) The elite in our renaissance were gulf apart from the common masses of our people and lived in a world of their own. (iii) The Hindu bias usually prevalent in the awakened gentlemen of our movement could not but alienate the Muslim consciousness, which has unfortunate consequences, much to the gratification of our alien British rulers.

The Notes highlighted the achievements of the men in our Renaissance to serve as an inspiration to those for whom the booklet was primarily intended. It was natural in this context to overlook the complexities in the actual historical situation, the drawbacks in the lives depicted and their shortcomings.

II On the 'Economic Thought of Rammohun Roy'

The text of this Essay, in the very opening passage, makes it abundantly clear that it deals with the varied information presented by Rammohun Roy for scrutiny by the British Parliament in view of the revision of the East India Company's Charter due in 1833. The Essay is therefore not an examination of the economic thought of Rammohun Roy in its entirety, and much of it had to be left out.

III On 'David Hare'

Modern historians have pointed out the shortcomings of David Hare, questioning his morality in business matters and suggesting in him a patronising attitude towards the 'young hopefuls' who ran after him for educational benefits. This Essay on the other hand highlights the veneration that he undoubtedly inspired in the minds of his beneficiaries and his younger contemporaries which certainly was a fact in the history of the period that cannot be passed over.
IV On 'Derozio and Young Bengal'

In our younger days we were brought up in the idea that Derozio and the Derozians were a bunch of misguided errant people steeped in blind Anglophilism, indifferent to our own country and people, wild and intemperate in their personal lives. This Essay was a vindication of their movement, its specific rational idealism, their courage and personal integrity. Curiously, this vindication has now in certain circles seems to have led to an over-reaction in their favour attributing to them revolutionary modern qualities which would have seemed alien to their real nature. It is difficult indeed to preserve a historical balance as soon as one steps out of the concrete context, for indeed each observer has his scheme of the weal or woe.'