

Hindu liberal reform in Bengal in the 19th Century

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A significant feature of the social history of nineteenth-century Bengal was the emergence of a middle-class intelligentsia, a group whose evolution and historical agency was both interwoven with and responded to the changes brought about by British rule and administration. This new elite was remarkable for its engagement with the social problems and tensions of its time, an engagement that was, however (as Barun De, SumitSarkar, and others have pointed out) crucially limited by the absence of any genuine mass contact. In another sense, though, it can be argued that it was precisely this lack that made the various attempts at a kind of activism by this group – attempts that are simplistically lumped together as `social reform' – so remarkable. Inscribed within an elite middle-class intellectual culture, these men attempted to go beyond this and address wider problems and issues, though admittedly in a severely limited manner. Both the limits and the achievements are historically important.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, a debate crystallized about the nature of the educational policy to be followed in Bengal. This involved the famous Orientalist-Anglicist controversy (the value of classical scriptural education in the Indian traditions counterposed to elementary English education), but was not limited to this. The debate was much wider, and included interventions about the necessity for Western scientific training (notably by Rammohun Roy), arguments for instruction in the vernacular by missionaries, among others, and a range of other positions. Macaulay's Education Minute of 1835 effectively resolved this debate, ruling that the annual sum of 10,000 pounds that

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had been earmarked for education by the 1813 Act were to be spent on higher education in the English medium, chiefly to produce a class of lower-level administrators. This was not the end point of government-sponsored educational initiatives, however; Wood's Despatch of 1854 authorized the setting up of universities in the three Presidencies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras. Shortly afterwards, a system of 'grants-in-aid' was started for private interests in education. These, in the form of the Hindu College (founded 1816), Sanskrit College (1824), and a number of schools, were already in existence.

The relationship between the new education and the activism of the intelligentsia, however, was not simple or direct. It must be remembered that the social group that the British administrators sought to create – and did create – was a body of lower-middle class men who would man the lower-level posts in the official administration. In Bengal these were also overwhelmingly upper-caste men, frequently having undergone impoverishment: Brahmins, Kayasthas, and Vaidyas. This was not, however, the group that involved itself in the activism of social reform. Social reformers came, by and large, from an older elite, an elite that, however, had undergone a significant transmutation with the impact of English education and the new importance accorded to vernaculars. These were men from a traditional (Persianized or Sanskrit-educated) literati who were steeped in the classical scriptures and at ease in the vernacular. Western education was something they appropriated, and put to use in the debates and forms of activism that they engaged in. That there was a significant element of influence in this appropriation is unquestionable – Rammohun Roy, the Derozians, the BrahmoSamaj leaders and Vidyasagar were all interested and influenced by the powerful currents of liberal and rational thought within this new culture. However, the new ideas themselves underwent significant adaptation and mutation; they did not act upon intellectually inert recipients.

Western education constituted a field of opportunity for those with the resources to make use of it: it provided the entry point into the liberal professions – law, medicine, journalism and education. As SumitSarkar points out, there was a remarkably low level of entrepreneurial involvement among the Bengali *bhadralok*. The typical member of the new intelligentsia derived part of his income from land (due to the diffusion of land control after the introduction of the Permanent Settlement) in the form of *rentier* profits, and part from the liberal professions.

Education apart, the other major change in the social landscape of educated nineteenth-century Bengalis was print culture. Print, education and new employment opportunities constituted the axis of a powerful public space where issues became controversies and scandals that were discussed, opinions were formulated and made, and ideologies were produced. TanikaSarkar uses the Habemasian concept of a public sphere to illuminate the shift from reform to revivalism in Bengali middle-class Hindu activism in the later nineteenth century. In the context of the early nineteenth century, the theologian Dermot Killingley has examined the same process – though not through the same theoretical problematic – in the context of the activities of Rammohun Roy², and Lata Mani has analysed at length the discourses about *sati* that were produced in both the official and the public sphere. If there is a dominant narrative that can be deduced from the history of middle-class social activism in Bengal, it is this elaboration and growth of the public sphere, as the site for clashing formulations of identity, culture and tradition. Socio-religious reform was one of the impulses within this middle-class public sphere, as embodied in the work and thought of the ‘liberal’ intelligentsia, Rammohun Roy being its foremost representative. It is, however, important to keep in mind that there existed powerful contrary impulses within this very social group: most significantly, an influential body of professionals and intellectuals, equally conversant

² <http://www.historydiscussion.net/history-of-india/religious-and-social-reform-of-india-the-indian-renaissance/1637>

with 'modern' ideas, who took to the path of conservative reaction and re-assertion of tradition-for-its-own-sake, a path that, in the later nineteenth century, increasingly shaded into various forms of revivalism. (To make another qualification, this was not the only source of revivalist ideology; with Vivekananda or Bankimchandra the path traversed to a militant Hindu nationalism was much more radical).

Even as appropriated tender, though, 'Westernization' or 'secularization' of thought and culture cannot fully explain the nature of the new intellectual elite or the thrust towards either reform or revivalism. It is of the greatest significance that the battles fought for the abolition of *sati*, the legalization of widow remarriage, the raising of the age of consent in conjugal relations, and other issues, *were all fought on the terrain of religion and religious scripture*. 'Secular' influences notwithstanding, this was also the period when religious texts came into the foreground of the public sphere, and the reinterpretation of tradition became the locus of divergent and opposed agenda. Social reform – and in the context of nineteenth-century Bengali Hindu society this meant primarily reform in the areas of gender and education – was also a process whereby religious traditions were redefined and reformulated, by liberals and conservatives alike. This greatly qualifies AshisNandy's argument that the nineteenth century was marked by a replacement of genuine religious faith and tradition by secular 'knowledge'. Social reformers couched their demands in terms of 'correct' and 'uncorrupted' interpretations of the scriptures. In large part, this had a pragmatic basis: the colonial state repeatedly asserted (and legally enshrined, through the Cornwallis Code of 1793) the principle that in the sphere of religious belief and usage, communities would be governed by their own scriptural norms, and reform could only be sought if it was conclusively established that existing practices (*sati*, for instance) ran contrary to the scriptures. Argument, therefore, had to be based – on both sides – on a rigorous reading of scriptural tradition.

³https://www.jstor.org/stable/44140469?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

Thus, one of the flows into the public sphere was exclusively religious, taking the form of the transmission – through missionary proselytization and print, for instance – of textual knowledge, now too important to be limited to the Brahmins and *ulema*. Study circles, translations and commentaries were among the more obvious forms whereby religious knowledge was circulated and redefined, and a tradition of public debate came into being among the learned of the major communities (in Hindu society this was called *shastrartha* and among Muslims it was known as *bahas*). This point reinscribes the importance of debate within the educated public sphere: religious traditions and ideologies clashed acrimoniously, but at this stage they were not seen as hermetically sealed off from one another, and they engaged in a constant dialogue. Positions – whether conservative or liberal – had to be argued through, not merely stated as self-evident truth.

Thus, some of the main coordinates of nineteenth-century social activism can be sketched out: education, print and the formation of a qualitatively new public space; the growth of a middle-class intelligentsia, conversant with modern Western ideas but steeped in both vernacular and scriptural tradition, that could move in either liberal or reactionary directions; and the foregrounding of religion in public discourse. To this, in the context of Bengal in particular, another interesting and important coordinate can be adduced: the centrality of gender, as perhaps the dominant ground for the articulation of both emancipatory and conservative doctrines. A particular hierarchical structuring of gender relations was, as SekharBandopadhyaya has argued, both in scripture and in practice interlocked with caste purity. Further, the very notion of Hindu tradition was, in social terms, deeply intermeshed with the preservation of patriarchal family relations of a particular kind. SumitSarkar points out that gender also represent⁴ed an area of greater possibility for reformist energies than caste or class, given the socially circumscribed

⁴https://www.jstor.org/stable/44140469?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

nature of reform initiatives. Certain issues relating to gender – *sati* or widow remarriage, for instance – could be addressed within a largely upper-caste social context; extensive activism in other spheres might have led reformers beyond the spheres of their immediate experience. Sangari and Vaid have characterized the nineteenth century as a period when patriarchy was reinscribed or ‘recast’ by colonialism, and its agent, the educated middle class. All the reformers really did, in this argument, was attempt to reformulate essentially patriarchal gender relations in a mode more consistent with capitalist modernity, through their valorization of limited female education, companionate marriage and a more enlightened domesticity. This is a problematic viewpoint, but has exercised much influence, especially in feminist circles. It certainly supplies a set of problems around which the question of social reform and gender can be organized.

To examine these problems more seriously, it is necessary to attempt a survey of some of the major reformers and reformist initiatives in ‘Hindu’ society in this period. Reform, of course, is just one of many narratives of socio-religious activism in this period. Other experiences existed: the trajectories of the BrahmoSamaj after Rammohun Roy, for instance, cannot be fitted easily into a mere narrative of ‘reform’. However, reform did constitute perhaps the most important and certainly the most visible face of the movements of the Bengali Hindu intelligentsia. Examining this would involve looking at, first, Raja Rammohun Roy, then the brief but radical Young Bengal movement of the Derozians, then Vidyasagar, and finally the trajectories of the BrahmoSamaj. In general terms, these histories encase the activism of the liberal intelligentsia in the nineteenth century. The latter half of the century witnessed an ambiguous but discernible shift towards an anti-liberal revivalism, which at many points needs to be distinguished from an older tradition of conservatism.

Rammohun founded the Atmiya Sabha in 1815 to propagate his model of a monotheistic faith; in 1828 this was to become the Brahmo Sabha, and in 1830 the BrahmoSamaj. He circulated his ideas through vigorous and systematic use of the burgeoning public sphere, especially in the field of journalism. The articles he published in his journals – prominent among these being the *Sambad-Kaumudi* and the *Brahmunnical Magazine* – and perhaps even more so his numerous tracts in Persian, Bengali and English forced religious and social debate upon the conservative orthodoxy. Rammohun has been associated by some with the founding of the Hindu College in 1816; more to the point, in his famous letter to Lord Amherst in 1823 he argued for the introduction of a particular kind of Western education – based on the modern sciences – in the Indian school and college curriculum. He died in Bristol in 1833.

However, Rammohun is best remembered for two things – his highly original and sophisticated formulation of certain religious principles, and his leadership and propagation of the anti-sati cause. His religious thinking has sometimes been characterized as a synthesis of Islamic, Western and Hindu traditions. However, this is not an adequate description, because the word ‘synthesis’ suggests a rather indiscriminating and passive kind of mutual transfer. Rammohun, on the contrary, developed a deeply discriminating and creative interpretation of key doctrines in Islam, Hinduism and Christianity, selecting and excluding according to some clearly worked out principles. He opposed the Brahminical tradition of *adhikari-bheda*, or graded religious knowledge to which a priestly elite had privileged access. In this sense his thinking was socially subversive, since he challenged hierarchies founded on this privileged access, attacked priestly monopoly of the major doctrines and texts, and used the public sphere of print to enable wider access to what he saw as religious truths. These truths, as he conceived them, were universal, and shared by all the great religions.

⁵<https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/power-reforms-and-the-bengal-model/article23229387.ece>

In his later years, Rammohun engaged deeply with Christian doctrine, being attracted particularly to the Unitarian brand, which fitted in with some of the ideas he had already developed. Through prolonged dialogues and debates with Christian missionaries, he came to acquire a special respect for the ethics of the religion, as embodied in the figure of Christ. He culled Christ's preachings in his *Precepts Of Jesus*. Once again, Rammohun's engagement with Christianity demonstrates the imbrication of theological inquiry with social concern that was so characteristic of him. Much has been written about his own conformity to Brahminical practices and rituals. However, the absence of personal example does not negate the very real radicalism of many of the ideas that he put forward. Some of them were subsequently to pass into the self-construction of liberal religious doctrine, and appear fairly standard in the present day – the attack on a mediatory priesthood, for instance, or the rejection of a graded religious knowledge. Yet at the turn of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth there was nothing commonsensical about these principles and ideas, and Rammohun was frequently to run up against stiff opposition. His continued liberalism, then, in the context of the times was often a genuinely radical force, something usually not given its due by the revisionist debunking of the 'Bengal Renaissance' model.

The practice of burning widows on their husbands' funeral pyre had never been obligatory in doctrinal literature, but had been, at select times, an object of valorization in upper-caste circles. In Bengal, however, by the turn of the century, the largest number of instances of sati was to be found among shudras, something attributed by S.N Mukherjee to the growing upward mobility of members of this social group (partly because of some lower-caste involvement in foreign trade), and the desire for respectability to buttress this economic prosperity: in short, a kind of sanskritization impulse. It appears that in general terms, the incidence of sati was on the rise in the early years of the 19th century. This can be linked also to certain family pressures on widows in

the context of *dayabhaga*, or the limited property rights that women enjoyed if their husbands died. Given the economic troubles of many landowners in the wake of the new land revenue settlements, the elimination of widows in the family presented a possible avenue for the accumulation of wealth and property. However, perhaps most importantly, the early nineteenth century represented, above all, an unprecedented awareness of sati, and, equally importantly, an awareness that it could be a contested issue. The debate over sati, among other things, represents the production of a particular kind of discourse.

The narrative of the debate on sati and its eventual abolition is revealing in itself. Initially, the policy of the colonial State was one of complete non-interference. Matters took a turn, however, when pressures by individual colonial officials like Walter Ewer and by Christian missionaries compelled the Nizamat Adalat, the apex body in Bengal for administering criminal justice, to consider the issue of the nature of scriptural authorization for the practice of burning widows. The Adalat invited opinions from pandits like Mrityunjay Vidyalankar, who undertook a study of the relevant scriptures and came to the conclusion that sati was not obligatory, although it was permissible under certain conditions, chief among these being the widow's own consent. The first piece of legislation passed by the government was a Regulation in 1813, which ruled that magistrates and the police had to be present at each sati, that the widow had to consent in order for the rite to take place, and that she should not be below 14 years of age (which last was a significant step, given the high incidence of child marriage and widowhood). As Lata Mani points out, this made it possible to make a distinction between 'good' (or voluntary) and 'bad' satsis.

From this, the debates on sati developed and became more bitter, as proposals for reform became more radical. Christian missionaries accused the State of un-Christian

⁶<http://indiacompetition.blogspot.com/2011/01/social-and-religious-reforms-in-19th.html>

practice in their tacit support of certain manifestations of what was clearly an inhuman practice. This was compounded by the fact that women frequently tried to jump out of the pyre even after having initially given their consent, something that makes the notion of consent problematic, assent being irrevocable and, further, being given at a time when the widow could have no previous experience of similar or comparable physical agony. From about 1818, Rammohun entered the debate on sati, using all the weapons the public sphere offered him. Petitioning – a major technique, incidentally, of later moderate-nationalist agitation – was pioneered by him; he pamphleteered, collected signatures, organized public meetings and wrote prolifically about the issue. He counterposed the ideal of ascetic widowhood – also a shastric injunction – to the practice of sati, for which, he argued in his famous 1818 Petition to the colonial state, the shastric requirements (complete calmness, and a renunciation of any expectation of afterworldly rewards) could never be met. The flaws in the way women were socialized made any genuine consent impossible, and they were frequently enticed to commit sati with the promise of a reunion with their husbands in heaven.

In response to this, the conservative orthodoxy brought out a counter-petition. As Lata Mani points out, the Hindu Dharma Sabha and other associations that defended the practice of sati inverted Rammohun's arguments. While Rammohun argued that the *shastras* – and he cited the *Manusmriti* among others – did not sanction sati in any of its currently possible forms, and that a correct interpretation of the scriptures should be privileged over custom, the orthodoxy held that custom and usage were normatively as crucial to the authority of current practice as the scriptures were. Further, they argued for the primacy of priestly interpretation of the scriptures. If this is kept in mind, much of Rammohun's religious thinking can be understood. His attack upon graded religious knowledge can be seen as evolving not in a vacuum of pure thought, but in the

contentious context of assertions and counter-assertions that produced his⁷ activism. The government went through a long period of vacillation as the debates played themselves out. Finally, in 1829, Bentinck passed the crucial law abolishing and criminalizing sati, on the grounds – significantly – that he was simply applying a more persuasive interpretation of Hindu law.

Lata Mani has used the debates on sati to argue that the different arguments employed in the discourse all shared a common point of departure – the absolute primacy of scripture, and the marginalization, even trivialization, of the widow's own agency and will. The issue of sati, for Mani, becomes merely the *site* where alternative interpretations of tradition were constructed and elaborate. Women as people remained not only silent but peripheral to this discourse. This, she argues, links the divergent positions of Rammohun, the State and the orthodoxy together. However, Mani ignores what is perhaps the crucial determinant of this discourse – the successive governmental regulations that eschewed any interventions that could not be justified by argument from the scriptures. It should be remembered that, whatever the acrimonious debaters in the public sphere of debates on sati might have ended up doing, they were not trying primarily to produce a 'discourse'. They were arguing for a concrete end – the abolition or retention of a specific rite. To argue effectively, they had to argue within the space circumscribed by the legislative authority, the colonial state, and so *effective* arguments had to be grounded in the interpretation of tradition; nothing else would have worked. Rammohun's writings *outside* the official sphere of discourse reveal an acute awareness of the inhumanity inflicted upon women *as subjects* through the practice of sati. His extremely radical arguments about the socialization of women, further, opened up spaces where existing gender relations could be seen as problematic and open to debate, as could the absence of education, adequate property rights, and freedom of expression.

⁷<https://aspirantforum.com/2014/11/28/social-and-religious-reform-movements-of-the-19th-century-in-india/>

Women were to emerge as active *agents* in the process of reform much later, but the openings for such agency were partly created by the new discourses that emerged in the early nineteenth century. Tanika Sarkar has argued that the very recognition of women's consent as a significant factor in gender-specific social legislation represented a major step towards the creation of women as subjects.

Before turning to Vidyasagar, the other great liberal reformer of nineteenth-century Bengal, it is necessary to briefly examine another narrative, of a movement that accomplished nothing major by way of social change, but which perhaps embodied the most radical impulses in the period of the 'Renaissance'. This was the movement of the Derozians, a group of iconoclastic young men centring around the charismatic figure of the Eurasian Henry Vivian Derozio (1809-31) in Hindu College. Derozio propounded ideas that were radical, even heretical: he was a freethinker and agnostic, an open admirer of the French Revolution, an early romantic patriot (who expressed his ideas in verse), and a critic of caste-based Hindu society. He was expelled from the college for his views and for his 'corrupting' influence on students, and died in penury at the age of 22. His students, however, took up his ideas and for a brief time represented a radical, even shocking, challenge to the middle-class Hindu orthodoxy.

The ideas of the Derozians were radical enough, but what stung the orthodoxy was their focus on *practice*, something absent from Rammohun Roy, whose personal life was blamelessly orthodox and Brahminical. The Derozians, on the contrary, tried to achieve a kind of revolution in lifestyle that represented a message in itself. They flouted sacred taboos in public: they ate beef, drank wine, threw chicken bones into the houses of pandits, refused to worship idols, and violated a range of purity-and-pollution taboos in an effort at self-de-Brahminization. Rammohun had fought his cases through argument, and had remained on a plane where there was a meeting-point, a shared discursive space, between the orthodoxy and himself. The Derozians did put forward

proposals for concrete reform – for the legalization of widow remarriage, for the Indianization of the services, for trial by jury, for women’s education, for revision of the East India Company’s charter, for the abolition of child marriage – through the by now familiar media of public discourse: petitions, journals, and public meetings. However, in their times and later, the Derozians were remembered not for this, but for their exhibitionism and defiant public violation of taboo. It was this that invited wrath from the orthodoxy. Briefly, the Derozians seemed to represent a move away from the layered, structured coercion of Brahminism, and to suggest the possibility of alternative modes of living. For the orthodox, this was terrifying, since it threatened to cut the ground from beneath the feet of their hegemony.

Vidyasagar’s educational initiatives flowed partly from a desire to bridge a gulf that was opening up between the traditional Brahmin Sanskrit-educated intelligentsia – frequently undergoing experiences of impoverishment – and a multi-caste but economically affluent English-educated intelligentsia. His accent on vernacular learning can be placed in this context. Vidyasagar made multiple contributions to the development of modern Bengali prose: he introduced standardized punctuation, syntax, compiled glossaries for modern concepts, and emancipated the language from its Sanskrit high-scholasticism. All these formed part of his drive for elementary education in Bengali, to which end he composed school primers, manuals for children, and published a number of tracts. As Principal of Sanskrit College, he undertook wide-ranging syllabus reform. As importantly, in his capacity as Assistant Inspector of Schools, he tried to spread vernacular education in rural society, setting up model schools in the districts under his charge. The democratizing impulse in his educational reform programme also extended to a very radical measure in its time – the consistent

⁸<https://socialwork-msw.blogspot.com/2013/10/social-reforms-movements-in-india-19th.html>

championing of women's *schooling*. It has been pointed out that women's education *per se* was not something conservatives opposed (Radhakanta Deb, for instance, supported zenana education); it was *schooling* that presented radically new possibilities. Sending girls to school meant socializing them within a significantly different structure, within a public space where they had to travel beyond the confines of the household, where they were given a public identity as students, and where they were individuated.

It was, of course, in the sphere of gender that Vidyasagar's interventions were most radical and most controversial. Unlike Rammohun, his campaigns for reform were not grounded in elaborately worked out philosophical doctrines. With the earlier reformer, there appears a sense in which his ideas almost seem to flow automatically into his endorsement of certain positions vis-à-vis Hindu society and his refusal of others. Vidyasagar, on the contrary, did not either argue from absolute theological positions or derive them from his positions, but he took up very concrete issues, and in doing so evoked perhaps even more orthodox revulsion and hostility than Rammohun had done.

The standard biographical accounts indicate that Vidyasagar was, early in his youth, deeply moved by the evil of child-marriage and especially so by the frequent tragedy of child-widowhood. In 1850 he published a tract about this, more as an attempt to generate and transform consciousness of this issue in the public sphere than as an argument for concrete reform. Significantly, this tract also included a valorization of a model of conjugal love and companionate marriage, a condemnation of the crippling rules of austere widowhood, and a critique of both textual models and actual practices of the illiteracy and domestic servitude of women. Particularly marked was the emphasis on personal experience – the sufferings of widows and child-brides were read as part of the common experience of society.

Vidyasagar is best remembered for his campaign for the legalization of widow remarriage. This was the most notable success of his career as social reformer, and also the most controversial, inciting the orthodoxy to previously undreamt-of levels of vituperation, anger and organized counter-propaganda. Vidyasagar was attacking – as had Rammohun in the case of sati – a specifically high-caste routine that had spread vertically in the nineteenth-century context of growing Sankritization. By the time Vidyasagar started his campaign in the 1840s, the ban on widow-remarriage had become fairly widespread. Doctrinally, this found strength in the shastric injunction that the Hindu widow was *ardhangini* – half the husband’s body – and so when he died, half of him lived on in her form. This guaranteed certain limited usufructory rights over property to widows. However, it also precluded the possibility of the widow ever entering into another licit sexual relationship; anything of the sort would necessarily be adultery. Thus, the experience of widowhood was marked by harsh, almost unbearable controls – not only over feminine sexuality, but also dress, food, water, and so forth. This was compounded by the Age of Consent law in operation at the time, which ruled that girls had to be married before puberty (in the hot climate of Bengal, this meant particularly early marriages, almost always by the age of eight). No comparable restrictions existed for husbands, who could be aged, insane, or impotent. Widowhood thus often occurred at a pitifully early age, and young girls were made to suffer restrictions and – effectively – penalties that were quite inhuman. This seems to have moved Vidyasagar very deeply, and he spoke out against the idea that women should have to ‘turn to stone’ after their widowhood. Equally importantly, focusing on the privations suffered by widows involved focusing on the Hindu *family* as a site of oppression and tyranny more clearly than ever before, and in a sense thus extending the gender-specific social critiques initiated by Rammohun Roy and carried on by the Derozians.

As with the controversy over sati, but to a greatly increased extent, the issue of widow remarriage saw the mobilization of an energetic and acrimoniously feuding public sphere of debate, articulated through journals, cheap print, farces and so on, open now also to the growing body of lower middle-class men and, for the first time, to a small number of educated women. Vidyasagar mobilized about 5000 signatures in support of his petition for the legalization of widow remarriage. A terrified orthodoxy, led by Raja Radhakanta Deb, struck back with a counter-petition which boasted as many as 48,000 signatures. If anything, a possible reform of the widow remarriage law would hit the orthodoxy even harder than the ban on sati had. As SekharBandopadhyaya has pointed out, the interlocking of gender restrictions and caste purity was absolutely central to conservative social control, both normatively and practically, and this explains the lasting strength of the resistance to Vidyasagar's proposed reform. However, in the immediate pre-Mutiny years, the reformist voice generally tended to be heard with more sympathy by the colonial State than at any point of time before or after. Reform-minded proposals were coming from varied quarters: the Brahmos, Vidyasagar, remnants of the Derozians, and missionaries. Using the *ParasharSamhita* as his source – as the only legitimate text for the 'Kaliyuga' (in many contemporary discourses, as SumitSarkar has argued, the idea that the age currently experienced was the age of the *kaliyuga* was a very central theme) – Vidyasagar sought to demonstrate a scriptural sanction for the marriage of widows. The colonial government in 1856 chose to follow Vidyasagar's interpretation – interestingly, on the grounds that this was a law that involved no compulsion but merely enabled widows to remarry if they so chose. The idea of *choice* by women in matters of marriage was perhaps being articulated for the first time in a legal framework, something of immense value and significance.

Normatively, the reform shook traditional Hindu society. In practical terms, however, it accomplished very little that was of any substance. There were a number of

widow remarriages, but there was no real blow dealt to the restrictions and sufferings widows had to undergo. Vidyasagar seems to have been aware of this, and he died a deeply frustrated man. This frustration had also to do with the failure of another reform initiative that he had taken up in the 1860s and 1870s – the movement for the abolition of *kulin* polygamy, a scandalous issue in Hindu society, involving *kulin* Brahmin men sometimes marrying as many as 200 or 300 women, and extorting huge amounts of money as dowry. Vidyasagar led a major public agitation against this, but was unable to establish shastric precedents, and so the law remained unchanged. The problems of exclusive reliance on scriptural authority for reform, resulting eventually in a certain lack of bite, had by now become evident. As importantly, the colonial government was no longer as sympathetic towards reformist initiatives as it had been briefly in the 1850s. In addition to this, as SekharBandopadhyaya has argued, Vidyasagar's agitations were limited by the crucial fact that he preached more or less exclusively within the Brahminical sphere. All these added up to constitute a relative failure of achievement, given his genuine humanitarian passion, perhaps the strongest of any contemporary reformer. However, Vidyasagar's was not, in the long run, an absolute failure, not least because he helped open up for interrogation certain practices – centrally those pertaining to the family and domesticity – that had hitherto been taken for granted.

The high point of the career of the BrahmoSamaj of India was apparently the promulgation of the Brahmo Marriage Act of 1873, which legalized a package deal suggested by Sen that included a necessarily high marriageable age, consensual marriage, inter-caste marriage and the right to divorce. However, this was an ambiguous victory. Sen's original proposal had located this reform *within* Hindu society, something that had enraged both the orthodoxy and disturbed older liberals like Debendranath. The final legislation, coming after sharp orthodox protests, ruled that Brahmos were not Hindus and thus not subject to the same laws. This rupture, of course, had been a

perpetual possibility for religious liberals, who had often radically subverted accepted Hindu practices. However, the promulgation of, as it were, a separate 'liberal sphere' of Brahmoism deprived the movement of much of its radical edge. It might be noted here that from this point on, as Brahmoism crystallized in effect as a separate creed, the ground of contestation within Bengali Hindu society tended to gradually shift from the issue of right and wrong social practice to the issue of what constituted Hindu *identity*.

Once again, this high point of apparent success and expansion concealed deep internal pressures, this time centring round major dissatisfaction with the personality cult that had begun to develop around the figure of Keshab Chandra Sen. Sen had begun to spurn some of the more radical ideas of his followers – for instance, Durga Mohan's suggestion that the physical segregation between women and men at Brahmo assemblies be done away with. His unilateral rejection of such schemes marked him out as an authoritarian figure. Further, his championing of a form of ecstatic Vaishnava bhakti not structured by reason (interestingly, Sen visited Ramakrishna Paramhansa), and his closeness to missionaries disturbed many within the Samaj, which predictably split again, in 1878. The immediate issue of the break, however, was gender: despite his avowed opposition to child marriage, in February 1878 he married his underage daughter off to the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. This generated much protest, and occasioned a split, the opponents of Sen forming the SadharanBrahmoSamaj. Sen himself continued to move towards esotericism, and in January 1881 founded the Nava Vidhan or New Dispensation, an ambitious plan to synthesize the world's great religions into a single set of rituals and beliefs. However, this experiment ended shortly after his premature death in 1884. The future of the BrahmoSamaj rested with the SadharanSamaj, which founded small hospitals, orphanages, a leper asylum, and legal aid institutions for oppressed women. However, the radical impulses of the early

BrahmoSamaj had by now been well muted, and the movement had shrunk in its scope and range even as it had spread geographically.

This, in general, summarizes the trajectories of liberal socio-religious movements in Bengali Hindu society. The word 'liberal' is necessarily inadequate, for it glosses over immense internal differences. However, the label does help separate these movements from other trends and impulses – the devotionalism of Ramakrishna, for instance, or the muscular Hinduism preached by Bankimchandra and Vivekananda. In the second half of the nineteenth century, 'Hindu' activism in Bengal witnessed a general shift towards a more aggressive recasting of identity, the definition of identity and community *against* an equal and opposite Other rather than the negotiation of values and practices *within* the Hindu community. There was, of course, no absolute break between 'reform' and 'revivalism'; there were many shared points of departure, sometimes even of arrival. However, there was one very significant difference. In course of time, the 'harder' Hinduism propagated by late-nineteenth century revivalists came to rest upon a conception of nation, or at least of clearly defined community. Social change and reform within this community might or might not be desirable, but the main aim was always *self-strengthening*. Strength, power, and muscularity were the attributes of an ideal community. In contrast, the reform attempts of the earlier period had been much less aggressive, willing to find their answers within the structures of colonialism. But unlike their successors, the early reformers had managed to create a space where it was possible for people – including women, in fact especially women – to claim or at least be entitled to certain rights and a certain dignity *as* people, for themselves and not for reified conceptions of nation or community. It was this crucial liberal value that was to vanish completely from revivalist and much hyper-nationalist propaganda and literature.