CHAPTER THREE

Constructing Boundaries

Colonisation led to a process of development of identities of the various categories of the ruled, owing to the political, cultural and religious impact of the rulers, and also to a drawing of boundaries between people. Oddie has pointed out that the initial step that the Protestant missionaries took to differentiate between them and the large number of Indians who belonged to different sects and cults was to label them as ‘Hindus’ including those who believed in the worship of popular deities. It was believed that they belonged to a ‘coherent, comprehensive, and unified religious system that could be compared to other religious systems such as Christianity and Islam.’

Oddie also says that the Baptist missionary Ward was the first missionary who used the term in his diary in 1801. The primary boundary of course, was between the ‘whites’, (who were Christians), and the natives, who were categorized into Hindus and Muslims. Within their own communities the Hindus of Bengal as in the rest of India had well defined caste differences and the Muslims of Bengal were broadly divided into ashraf and atrap. So the two large extant indigenous religious communities were already socially fragmented when the missionaries came in contact with them. Ironically, the Christian converts from Hinduism would continue believing in the same social stratifications of caste despite their confessing a different faith.

One of the main concerns of this chapter will be to destabilise the impression that Bengali Christians constituted an unfractured social entity, to see how

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2 Ibid., p. 157.
3 The division between the ashraf and the atrap went deeper than mere distinction between the high and the low. ‘While the ashraf had names and styles of address very similar to those current in Arabia, Persia and northern India, the masses, particularly those at the poorer levels of society, had a tendency to retain local names and appellations, such as Mandal, Pramanik and Sarkar – family names occupational in their origin to be found among the Hindus as well...’ There was further fragmentation within the community due to a variety of religious sects and new religious movements. ‘The community could have been described at best as ‘an aggregate of believers.’ – Rafiuddin Ahmed, The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 6.
class and caste variegated the world of Bengali Christian consciousness. It would also explore whether the educated upper class within the community perceived their “lesser brethren” in the light of an otherness, even while they, under the impact of anticolonial nationalism, might be looking upon the coloniser as the significant other. Given the importance of caste in the creation of a hierarchical society in Bengal, this chapter will study the role of caste in complicating the process of bonding within the Bengali Christian community. It is, indeed, interesting to see how the process of indigenisation of a spiritual persuasion also involves the infusion of an imported faith with pre-existing indigenous hierarchy. It is equally important to see how far the Bengali Christian identity was also determined by an anxiety on the part of the Bengali Christian upper class to safeguard their selfhood from any hint of identity with the Anglo Indians, generally regarded hybrid in their racial composition by both the whites and the Bengalis. It would furthermore be interesting to see how members of the Brahmo community in Bengal – a social group which too evolved during the same period – were in many ways similar to and yet very different from, the educated middle class Bengali Christians.

Besides, this chapter focuses on the question of nationhood. The interface between the Bengali Christian identity and anticolonial nationalism in Bengal from the late nineteenth century onwards and in what ways the emergence of anticolonial nationalism complicated the process of Bengali Christian identity formation. After all anticolonial nationalism constituted a shared sentiment that must have tended to smudge, at significant points, the difference between the nationalistically inspired Christian Bengalis and their non-Christian counterparts. It would, indeed, be interesting to see how these two segments of Bengali population contributed to the development of a middle class anticolonial nationalism despite religious difference. On the other hand, it is important to decipher the ways in which the Bengali Christian with his/her cultural difference inscribed a specific signature on the world of middle class nationalism. This chapter will also explore the role of emerging anticolonial national consciousness in driving a wedge into the relationship between the Bengali Christians and the Christian colonisers of the land. In this connection the role of Bengali Christian individuals who used various cultural and
political platforms to voice a fundamental difference with the colonisers despite religious similarities with the latter, is also examined.

Section I: Conversion – The First Boundary
The very act of converting to another religion would quite predictably result in the ostracizing of the individual from the community of his birth and construct the first boundary between him and his social environment. Thus the conversion of the young boys who came under the influence of Christian missionaries in educational institutions and also that of the ordinary people in the rural areas left many homeless and rejected by their closest family members and friends and also by Hindu society. They were provided shelter by the local church and the Christian missions. Segregation and ostracism made these people a separate group with a common identity – they were all first generation native Christians. Thus they were driven together by the changed circumstances to form a newly variegated community with a vast barrier between it and the already existing Hindu and Muslim communities. These Bengali Christians were wholly unacceptable by the native religious communities not only because they were practicing an alien religion but also because they had broken away from the main stream of popular social ideas and institutions in accordance with the teachings of the Christian missionaries.

All religious rites and practices related to birth, marriage, death and other social customs were new in the lives of the converts, and they were no longer under the control of the Brahmins; now their religious leaders were native converts turned into Christian missionaries and also the European missionaries, the former group originally of diverse castes and the latter, casteless. The thought of a transition from a tradition bound community of one’s ancestors to a new condition created by the Christian missionaries caused immense emotional turmoil in the minds of the young converts before they finally decided to forsake home and hearth for the new religion. Rethinking and objectivising one’s religious convictions was the order of the day for the educated middle class Bengalis whereas for those belonging to the
economically backward classes the support of the missionaries after conversion gave a ray of hope for social and financial uplift.

The plight of renowned nineteenth century Bengali Christian converts like Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjea, Rev. Lal Behari Day, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Rev. Kali Charan Banurji, Brahma Bandhab Upadhyay etc. is well known. They were all rejected by their own family and the Hindu community. In the eyes of the Hindus they had lost their caste. This was true of all those who crossed over from Hinduism to Christianity. But firmly rooted in their native culture and mind-set these Bengali Christian converts never lost their ‘Bengali’ identity. In fact the kernel of the development of strained relationship with the colonisers in subsequent years lay dormant in their outlook.

Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjea was a devout Christian who till 1865 wrote criticisms of Hindu philosophy and religious practices. But in his post 1865 philosophical oeuvre there is a definite change in his trend of thoughts on Hinduism. He endeavoured to rationalise Hindu philosophy in relation to Christianity. It was in 1881 that Krishna Mohan delivered a Lecture on The Relation between Christianity and Hinduism. In this discourse he shows maturity of thought to a certain extent though he never forgets his purpose as a missionary – that of converting the Hindus. It is not simply a Lecture conveying his originality of thought on the subject of comparative religion (Christianity and Hinduism) but it is also aimed at sternly advising the educated Hindus to accept Christianity by realising the similarities of concepts between the two religions, and accepting that Christianity has gone several steps beyond what their Rishis had said in the Vedas. That Christ is the Prajapati described in those religious texts.

The fundamental principles of Christian doctrine in relation to the salvation of the world find a remarkable counterpart in the Vedic principles of primitive Hinduism in relation to the destruction of sin, and the redemption of the sinner by the efficacy of Sacrifice, itself a figure of Prajapati, the Lord and Saviour of the Creation, who had given himself up as an offering for that purpose…the meaning of Prajapati an
appellative, variously described as a *Purusha* begotten in the beginning, as *Viswakarma* the creator of all, singularly coincides with the meaning of the name and offices of the historical reality Jesus Christ, and that no other person than Jesus of Nazareth has appeared in the world claiming the character and position of the self-sacrificing *Prajapati*, at the same time both mortal and immortal.\(^4\)

He believed that a proper understanding of the two above-mentioned propositions would help the men of the East understand the men of the West and vice versa. He tried to draw parallels between the two religions in order to trace a common path that aims at the same destination. But his argument was that Christianity has answers to all the philosophical / religious questions we might raise, whereas Hinduism has lacunae in certain areas.

In the days of his youth Krishna Mohan went about his criticism of the prevalent native religious customs and beliefs, alongside his own quest for religious truth in the most spirited manner. But in his mature years he did some profound rethinking although of course he had not lost his enthusiasm and fortitude regarding his evangelical mission. He questioned and weighed the scriptural texts and also the essence, of both Hinduism and Christianity and together with justifying his own choice of faith he seems to defend the ancient religion of his ancestors by emphasizing the points of similarity between the two religions.

Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907) who also falls into the religious tradition of Krishna Mohan had a somewhat similar philosophy. He was a Roman Catholic ascetic yet a Vedantin. Like Krishna Mohan he was also an educated upper-caste Hindu – a middle-class Bengali Brahmin who had embraced Christianity. Quite along the lines of Krishna Mohan, Brahmabandhab had also attempted to merge Christian doctrines with an Indian idiom. But the problem with Upadhyay is that he is quite enigmatic – it is difficult to categorize him as either a Christian or a Hindu. As Lipner says,

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After his conversion he sought passionately to show, by pen and by deed, that by becoming Christian he had not ceased to be a patriotic Hindu. The tension inherent in his claim tended to mislead, in Upadhyay’s time, and it does so today. It does not facilitate a balanced assessment of the man.⁵

Brahmabandhab claimed that he was a ‘Hindu Catholic’. My concern is not what he had to claim about Hinduism or Christianity but the fact that he could not forsake one for the other. He had accepted Christianity in principle yet he could not renounce his ancestral religion completely. In his spiritual journey he had also experimented with Brahmaism but he finally settled for Hinduism and Catholicism. In an article in the Sophia⁶ entitled ‘Our Attitude towards Hinduism’ (January 1895), he says,

The religion of Christ is supernatural. All the doctrines of Christ,...from beginning to end, are beyond the domain of reason...The truths in Hinduism are of pure reason illuminated in the order of nature by the light of the Holy Spirit. They do not overstep reason...But though the religion of Christ is beyond the grasp of nature and reason, still its foundation rests upon the truths of nature and reason. Destroy the religion of nature and reason; you destroy the supernatural religion of Christ. Hence a true missionary of Christ, instead of vilifying Hinduism, should find out truths from it by study and research.⁷

What made the educated Bengali Christian intelligentsia turn to their native religion and try to draw parallels with Christianity? Perhaps, in keeping with the processes rightly recognized by later day ‘modernists’ – they were

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⁵ Julius Lipner, Brahmanbandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2001), p. viii.

⁶ A Catholic monthly, edited by Upadhyay, who in those days was known as Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay, to fight India’s nationalist cause on the moral and religious fronts. Launched in 1894, it was entitled Sophia, ‘A Monthly Catholic Journal, edited by B.C. Banerji’. This journal survived for about five years. Each issue was about sixteen pages long (about A4 in size), and inside the front cover was a quotation from the book of Wisdom (Book of the Wisdom of Solomon, one of the books of the Old Testament in the Bible, but as it was never a part of the Hebrew Bible it was termed as Deuterocanonical by the Catholics but non-canonical or apocryphal by the Protestant Churches). In the quotations used by Upadhyay the word ‘wisdom’ would be substituted by the word ‘sophia’. Each issue consisted of four or five articles by the editor and other contributors. At the end of the journal there would generally be quotations and pieces of information and if they were religious in nature they would invariably be in praise of Catholicism.

⁷ Lipner, op. cit., p. 126.
unconsciously contributing to the method of constructing national identity. What was the identity of a Bengali Christian in the 19th century? Did the educated, enlightened Bengali Christian forget his roots? Certainly not, in support of this observation besides Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjea and Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, we can cite examples of men like Rev. Lal Behari Day, Kali Charan Banurji, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and others who converted to the religion of their rulers but did not turn into blind supporters of the British Raj. Instead they utilised their public image to reach out to people with their nationalist ideas alongside the liberal thoughts of Christianity.

Coming into closer contact with the Europeans and being introduced to western thought, they applied their newfound knowledge to the shaping of their own and their compatriot’s nationalist spirit. Each had his characteristic method, but the purpose was similar.

Krishna Mohan’s method was through indigenising Christianity. Although the religious doctrines and their interpretations came to him through Duff and other European missionaries under whose influence he had come, he had evolved his special point of view. In his later elucidations of religion, Hinduism played a role. This probably explains why his lectures delivered in Christ Church (where he was a Minister), were so popular among the common people. Besides other reasons, they could relate to his thoughts as his interpretation appealed to the natives’ way of thinking.

Krishna Mohan drew parallels between Hinduism and Christianity8 to establish that idolatory and caste distinction was not a part of the Vedic religion. He showed that this ancient form of Hinduism was not only as egalitarian as Christianity but also believed in an intangible, spiritual god. He has reminded people about three points in the Rig Veda that speak about ‘the existence of one unborn or eternal Being as different from and superior to Devas and Asuras, and far above heaven and earth, secondly the Devas were originally and by birth mortals like men, and that they got to Heaven by virtue of the Sacrifice. As if to apologise for an incipient polytheism that was growing up, the Rig Veda declared dogmatically that the sages designate the One Eternal

Being in manifold ways. They call Him *Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, Yama, Matariswa* etc.⁹ Thus, in his endeavours to satisfactorily convince his English speaking Hindu audience about the tenets of Christianity, he claims that Hinduism at the point of its very inception is quite similar to Christianity. The ritualistic practices of the later periods and even in his times were degenerative developments that took place afterwards.

Rev. Lal Behari Day although a devoted disciple of Duff, was not blind about his own status as a native Christian. In 1858 immediately after the governance of India was officially transferred to the Crown he delivered a lecture *Searchings of Heart* ¹⁰ in which he urged the English missionaries and the European lay men to love the people amongst whom they were working in order to be respected by them. He also requested the missionaries to have a harmonious and cordial relationship with the native Christians, as he could see that it was not so. In the post Mutiny period the Protestant missionaries did not play such an important role in developing Hindu religious awareness. They had become more tactful in their evangelical methods and the government had reverted to a neutral position with the purpose of impressing upon the people that it was not involved in the missionary projects. The anti Indian feeling which existed somewhat camouflaged so long became bitter and surfaced now because European women had been attacked during the Mutiny. In the interactions between the European missionaries and the Indian Christian converts the shadow of racism would lurk in the background. This was a matter of serious concern for the Indians during the post Mutiny period and Nemai Sadhan Bose¹¹ has discussed this problem at length with reference to the confrontation between the British and the Indians and he has also spoken about the racist tone of the newspaper commentaries in the second half of the nineteenth century. Day requested that the missionaries should ‘search their hearts’ and see whether they were blameworthy for being authoritarian and condescending and encouraging sycophancy. He also urged the native

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⁹Ibid., pp. 185-86.
¹⁰Lal Behari Day, *Searchings of Heart in Connection with Missions in Bengal* (Serampore, Tomohur Press, 1858). An address delivered at the united monthly missionary prayer-meeting on the 6th of December 1858, in the Union Chapel, Calcutta.
Christians to educate themselves in order to become respectable and responsible citizens - they should aspire to be physicians, engineers, lawyers, magistrates, judges, merchants etc.

The purpose of Day’s speech was to request every missionary, native Christian and European layman to introspect and see whether they were “discharging” their “duty” with respect to the “regeneration of India”. His speech has three clear divisions as it is addressed to three categories of people and he makes it obvious that the Indian Christians did not belong to the same category as the Europeans – the missionaries and the lay Europeans. Their status was lower than that of the ‘whites’, they were the ‘other’ who needed to establish themselves in society.

Day was very much aware of his social standing as compared to the Europeans hence referring to his reaction on hearing the first message of Queen Victoria to the people of India he says “And though a Bengali by birth, my heart thrilled with joy at the gracious words of my Sovereign, and I gladly joined in the enthusiastic cheering of the hundreds of Anglo-Saxons who then surrounded me”. He exposes the feeling experienced by Indians in the company of the English; Queen Victoria was his sovereign just as she was of the British but he was not one of them. Unfortunately neither was he completely acceptable among the Hindus because he had embraced the religion of the imperialists. So the Indian Christians were ‘otherised’ not only by the English but also by the Hindus although they never considered themselves as different from their fellow countrymen.

In his Govinda Samanta he has not selected any exotic theme as he clarifies at the very outset. ‘The reader is to expect here a plain and unvarnished tale of a plain peasant living in this plain country of Bengal...told in a plain manner.’ Repeated use of the word ‘plain’ emphasises that he highlights the ordinary life of a Bengal peasant – a raiyat in his novel. The choice of theme and Day’s empathy with the Bengal peasant shows how well he identified with the ordinary people of Bengal.

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In *Folk-Tales of Bengal*\(^{14}\) curiously enough Day has narrated stories that evoke the ambience of Bengal under the Muslim rulers; it is untouched by the Company and the Raj though as he himself has disclosed it was compiled only after it was suggested to him by Captain R.C. Temple, son of the distinguished Indian administrator Sir Richard Temple.\(^{15}\) The book is also dedicated to the same gentleman. Day gives an interesting reason for considering the suggestion, which is filled with pride in his own folk culture and a hurt sentiment due to the Europeans’ scornful attitude towards the people of this country, ‘...as I believed that the collection suggested would be a contribution, however slight, to that daily increasing literature of folk-lore and comparative mythology which, like comparative philosophy, proves that the swarthy and half-naked peasant on the banks of the Ganges is a cousin, albeit of the hundredth remove, to the fair-skinned and well-dressed Englishman on the banks of the Thames, I readily caught up the idea and cast about for materials.’\(^{16}\)

Nowhere does he mention the Sahibs, Chhota Lats, Sepoys, Banians etc. – there is no feel of the colonial experience. The dejected Day disillusioned with the racism of the ‘whites’ chose to speak about those more innocent pre-colonial times. He narrates stories which include ‘Brahmins’, ‘Brahmadaityas’\(^{17}\), ‘Rakshasas’ and ‘Rakshasis’ – ‘(male and female, they are in Hindu mythology huge giants and giantesses, or rather demons. The word means literally *raw-eaters*; they were probably the chiefs of the aborigines whom the Aryans overthrew on their first settlement in the country)’\(^{18}\) – ‘ghataks’\(^{19}\), ‘Duo’ and ‘Suo’ queens (‘Kings, in Bengali folk-tales invariably have two queens – the elder is called *duo*, that is, not loved; and the younger is called *suo*, that is, loved.’)\(^{20}\) and ‘faquirs’\(^{21}\). He mentions in the Preface that he had collected his stories from ‘a Bengali Christian woman, who, when a

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\(^{14}\) Lal Behari Day’s *Folk-Tales of Bengal* (1883), was the first collection of Bengali folktales to be compiled and published as a book.


\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. viii.

\(^{17}\) Brahmadityas: demoniac ghosts of Brahmins or Brahmin demons.

\(^{18}\) Rakshasas and Rakshasis: Ibid. p. 64.

\(^{19}\) Ghataks: match-makers

\(^{20}\) Ibid. p. 1.

\(^{21}\) Faquirs: Muslim mendicants
little girl and living in her heathen home, had heard many stories from her grandmother’ and after he heard ten stories from her he had to refer to ‘fresh sources’ and these were two old brahmins, an old barber and an old servant of his. He also discloses that he rejected many of the stories as they seemed to him ‘to contain spurious additions to the original stories which I had heard when a boy.’ It is surprising that a collection of folk tales from Bengal published in the late Victorian era has no reference to the colonial experience. Perhaps it was done on purpose – this certainly reflects Day’s attitude towards the powerful rulers. He felt oppressed but was unable to protest as he had to depend on them for survival and the wisest option was to adjust. Therefore his eloquent silence and he perpetuates only the pre-colonial times in the innocent world of the child.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt converted to Christianity in order to avoid marrying a minor girl, of his parents’ choice, and also because he thought he would be able to visit England, (the country that would fulfil his dreams of becoming a poet), with the help of the Christian missionaries. He even joined Bishop’s College in order to study theology and become a missionary. But he was unable to join any Christian mission because he was not prepared to sacrifice his love of worldly pleasures and material comforts and also because of the low salary offered in spite of his qualifications. He would be paid as much as the other native Christians and less than the British missionaries.

He had to face racial discrimination in various stages of his life. The fact that he had married white women did not go down well with the British community. What he did was far worse than a white man marrying or living in with an Indian woman. But he realised that on the Continent the attitude of the whites was different as he has said in a letter written to his friend Gour from Versailles, ‘Every one, whether high or low, will treat you as a man and not as a “damned nigger.” But this is Europe, my boy, and not India.’

Dutt realised that although he was westernised in his ways and in his attire and he also practiced the same religion as the British he would never be equal to...
them. He fulfilled his yearning of going to England to study law by selling and mortgaging his inheritance. But although he consciously admired and imitated the western way of life his forte lay in his poems and plays in Bengali. His greatest contribution to Bengali literature was the introduction of the sonnet form and of blank verse. He is a fine example of a hybridized Victorian Bengali with roots firmly embedded in his native culture.

*Meghnadbadh Kabya* Dutt’s most celebrated epic was first published in two parts in 1861. In which the story of Rama and Laksmana has been turned around from the original in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. In Dutt’s hands it has turned into a tragedy of betrayal. Here he has portrayed Ravana as a caring king, a loving father and brother who abducts Sita to avenge his sister's disgrace. Ravana's son Meghnad who is a courageous warrior, an upholder of righteousness is killed by Laksmana in collusion with his own uncle Bibhisana while unarmed and lost in meditation.

Perhaps Dutt could take the liberty of so drastically changing the original story because he was able to look objectively at the characters in the *Ramayana* just as Milton had attempted to perceive Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Only Milton’s Satan is evil but at the end of *Meghnadbadh Kabya* the reader’s sympathy lies with the defeated Ravana. This was a daring reversal of roles but so admirably portrayed in brilliant blank verse that the epic was an immediate success. He spoke about the struggle of man pitched against divine powers. The poet’s sympathies lay with the underdog.

Dutt was rather confused in his choice of social practices. He had rejected the Hindu way of life for Christianity but he annoyed the Christian missionaries with his ‘irregular’ lifestyle. After his death there was no one to bury him. Even Krishna Mohun Banerjea who had actively helped in his conversion process discretely stayed away as the Lord Bishop Robert Millman to whom he had gone to seek permission had refused to grant it. Dutt’s funeral was held a day after his death by Rev. Peter John Jarbo of the St. James’ Church on Lower Circular Road as he agreed to make arrangements for it. When the final proceedings were about to begin the Bishop’s permission arrived.26

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Kali Charan Banurji27 was a Kulin Brahmin who converted to Christianity and rose to the highest ranks of scholar, patriot and reformer. He came under the influence of Duff while he was studying in the Free Church Institution and embraced Christianity at the age of seventeen. As was the usual reaction to conversion in those days, he had to leave his home and had trouble getting his wife to move out of the house and when she was on the verge of being declared a ‘legal widow’ her people agreed to part with her and she joined her husband and later she too was baptized.

However the one surprising aspect of his life as far as his social relationships were concerned was his association with his family after conversion. Generally after baptism the individual would be shunned by friends and family and therefore would not have any connection with them. But in Kalicharan’s case we find that he used to send home some money from his scholarship as a student of Free Church Institution and after he joined the same institution as a teacher he would send home a large part of his salary especially during weddings and other important social functions and it was accepted. Kalicharan and his wife Elokesi were Christians and lived in Chinsurah and Kalicharan would sometimes visit his old home where he was welcomed among his relatives. He was baptized in 1864 a period in the social history of Bengal when caste and religion were two important factors in the day to day lives of the people, yet this was a strange exception to the prevalent rule. There could be two probable reasons for the out of the ordinary tolerance – Kalicharan’s pleasing personality and perhaps the family’s weak financial status.

Section II: Caste and Class – The Second Boundary

The peculiar institution of caste which is exclusive to Indian ethnicity had a functional significance in medieval Bengal as it implied the existence of a social division of labour with hereditary occupation. Under strict religious sanction permission was not granted to anyone to change the hereditary occupation and adopt that of others. What is important for this dissertation is the role of caste in nineteenth century Bengal society – ‘In Bengal, as in other parts of India, caste system in a significant way determined the patterns of

social relationship among the Hindus, as the modes of interaction between two individuals depended on their respective caste status.\(^{28}\)

The same tradition applied to the Muslims too as they were socially divided between the descendants of Muslim invaders, converts from upper caste Hindus, and those from lower caste Hindus – the *ashraf* and the *atlafl*. This practice lingered with conversions to Christianity – when Hindus converted to Christianity they carried their notions of caste with them into their new life as Christians, similarly the Muslim converts to Christianity also carried their notions of caste and class difference with them. However, in Bengal most of the Muslim converts to Christianity were from the lower strata of society, mainly poor farmers, hence the problem of caste discrimination among them was not as widespread as among the Hindu converts.

Stratification of people in Indian society began with division into groups according to profession. This was a rational and functional stratification but in later eras rather than being based on achievement it became a matter of ascription. ‘...the census operations, starting in the 1870s, tried to use it to rank actual castes (whose social relations were only salient on a regional basis) hierarchically on an All-India basis.’\(^{29}\) This turned out to be a method of legitimising the caste system. Having officially recorded caste categories the British government went on to make the people more caste conscious as now they officially belonged to a ‘felt community’\(^{30}\). This became an integral part of their identity which they were unable to renounce even after conversion. As far as caste consciousness is concerned it ‘was not apparent among converts in the Bengal and Bombay Presidencies where the missionaries had insisted on its exclusion from the churches from the very beginning.’\(^{31}\) However a hidden sense of pride/shame due to a secret sentiment of belonging was always

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\(^{29}\) Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Delhi, permanent black, 2001), p.51.

\(^{30}\) Rajat Kanta Ray, *The Felt Community: Commonalty and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2003). This book is about the nature of nationalism. He has shown that a ‘felt community’ had emerged before the emergence of modern Indian nationalism. Here I have borrowed the term to describe the many caste communities which people had become conscious of and each of these caste communities were really ‘felt communities’ with some shared practices.

lurking behind the apparent lack of caste consciousness after conversion to Christianity.

The term Bengali Christian applies to both the Catholics and the Protestants of Bengal. But as my concern in this dissertation is only the educated Bengali Protestant Christians\(^\text{32}\), I have focused especially on the boundaries that define this particular community. As the composition of this community was not homogeneous and cohesive there were many internal boundaries, especially caste distinctions, and class differences, to the extent that even today many of the upper class members of this community are not aware of the religious and cultural practices of the lower class people and a dividing line exists between these two broad categories of the community.

In a number of interviews conducted for this research project, while narrating the history of conversion of his/her ancestor, the interviewee who does not bear a Brahmin or upper caste surname has subtly pointed out such a connection in the family line. In caste driven Indian society the caste consciousness of the Indian Christian is not surprising. Even among the most genteel members of this community one has to scratch the surface and it emerges. A high caste lineage serves an important purpose as it silently secures ones social worth and therefore a pride in ones ancestry and a confidence in oneself in realizing social equations. The perpetuation of caste consciousness among the Indian Christians is due to the development of the community within the traditional Indian social milieu of which caste is an important component. It is so deeply ingrained in the Indian mind that it has led to the Indian Christians’ plurality of perception. The boundary created by the new religious conviction was made more secure and acceptable by the continuity of old social norms into this new space.

Mrs. Ashima Bairagee\(^\text{33}\) in the course of her interview mentioned her father-in-law Rev. Priyonath Bairagee’s ancestry and proudly pointed out his Brahmin origin. This is also stated in the song book \textit{Sebak Sangeet}\(^\text{34}\) where the

\(^{32}\) As I have clarified in the Introduction.

\(^{33}\) Ashima Bairagee, refer to the List of Interviewees

\(^{34}\) Nalini Ranjan Bairagee (ed.), \textit{Sebak Sangeet} (Calcutta, Publisher: Author, date not mentioned), p.1. Translation mine.
editor gives a brief history of the Bairagee ancestry while introducing Priyonath Bairagee (1886-1957), the leader of Sebak Samity a Bengali Protestant Christian group in Eastern Bengal that had indigenised Christianity in a rural form. According to the book, Priyonath’s great-great paternal grandfather hailed from Barisal and he was a Kulin Brahmin, a Bandyopadhyay, who married into the Baidya caste. Soon he converted to Vaishnavism and changed his surname to ‘Bairagee’, a term applied to Vaishnava anchorites, and was compelled to leave his ancestral village. He was an honest, forthright and fearless man who dared to take bold strides to protest against the prevailing caste system and other social evils. This boldness in attitude continued down the generations and his grandsons, Bhajan, Kalachand and Neelkamal, converted to Christianity Bhajan Bairagee travelled from village to village and spoke about his new faith through his melodious songs to the accompaniment of his ektara. Thus Christianity was preached in an indigenised form and at the grass roots level in those remote villages of Eastern Bengal that Bhajan visited, by someone who already hailed from a class/caste less sect. Bhajan’s grandson was Priyonath who is said to have initiated the Sebak Samity a metamorphosed form of the Pagla Samity, in Barisal and Faridpur, and their mission was to serve people. This was a period in the history of Bengal when the poor peasants were oppressed by the zamindars and the high caste Hindus. These marginalised people were able to

35Ektara: A variety of monochord, commonly used by Vaishnava singers.
36 Although Priyonath Bairagee’s descendants claim that he was the founder of ‘Sebak Samity’ this is disputed in a book published on the occasion of the centenary of Sebak Samity in 1985, by Thomas Manimohan Baidya, Bangladesh Sebak Samityr Itihas (Dhaka, Publisher: Author, 1986), p. 38. He argues that Sebak Samity evolved from Pagla Samity the founder of which was Kangali Mohanta who was a seeker of truth and that he had originally established a group called ‘Satyaguru’, an indigenous localized religious movement that was quite similar to Christianity in its ideologies as it placed emphasis on the worship of one god and had rejected idol worship and the caste system, but its manner of worship was through songs and an annual ‘mela’ or (religious) fair. They were located in Barisal. But as Kangali was unable to experience the truth he was seeking through this movement he converted to Christianity when he came in contact with some Christian missionaries. There were several first generation peasant Christians in the Barisal-Faridpur area who connected through this dal or group which went about preaching Christianity and ultimately it was the core group of this dal that went on to form the Prarthanashil Dal and finally the Sebak Samity.
37 Pagla Samity: An indigenous religious movement of peasant Christians in the remote villages of Barisal and Faridpur in the late nineteenth century that went about preaching Christianity and praying for people in distress and also helping them in whatsoever way they were able to. As they had no fixed order of worship, and whatever they had involved several hours of prayer (often through the night), and frenzied dancing ending in a trance they were called “pagla” or insane with the love of Jesus.
bond better through their new found faith which segregated them to form a unified group against the atrocities of the members of the upper echelons of Bengal society. They worshipped through songs composed by Priyonath and others, danced in a trance and in a frenzied state and they even saw visions in that condition. Several Hindus and Muslims were attracted to their prayer meetings spread out over a period of four to six days. The institution of caste had been completely demolished by these people, but today it does make a brief appearance while tracing lineage.

Ashima Bairagee nee Mitra was born in Chapra, Nadia. But she gradually revealed that on her paternal side they were converts from Islam and that even after conversion to Christianity they maintained their Muslim surname ‘Kazi’. Much later her father’s older brother had adopted ‘Mitra’ as his surname and the rest of the family followed suit. Thus they sought to create a new identity and their Muslim past was pushed to the background. So observing the rules of patriarchy after the oldest in the family took the initial step of changing his surname to create a new identity respected in Bengal’s bhadralok society the others followed suit. The fact remains that proof of Hindu upper caste ancestry was important for these Bengali Christians therefore the choice of surname, which socially promoted them to the rank of highly regarded upper caste Hindu Kayasthas. Therefore the identity of such people would be multi-layered with the one identity surfacing that would help in socialising freely in a given circumstance. This also establishes that identity is not fixed it can be changed.

Somen Das has repeatedly emphasized his mother’s connection with the famous Dutt family of Rambagan and has also mentioned that his father’s ancestors were originally ‘Chakraborty’ i.e. Brahmins, who had joined the Vaishnav cult and forsaken adherence to caste or the caste system and renamed themselves, ‘Krishtodas’, (in place of ‘Chakraborty’) meaning ‘servant of Lord Krishna’. Later, ‘Krishto’ was dropped and the name ‘Krishtodas’ was condensed to ‘Das’ and that is what was retained and passed on as the family’s surname. Das goes on to explain that the change from

38Bairagee, op. cit., pp., 18-20.
39Somen Das, refer to the List of Interviewees.
Vaishnavism to Christianity was perhaps not too difficult a stride for his grandfather who was the first convert to Christianity in the Das family. Pronoy Sarkar\textsuperscript{40} also mentioned his mother’s caste while narrating the story of the marriage of his parents – although she was from the Raghunathpur orphanage “it is said that she was the daughter of a Hindu priest” and after she lost her parents she became an inmate of the above mentioned orphanage. In this context I am also reminded of Deepika Mookerji (nee Bose)\textsuperscript{41} who had a late marriage because she was waiting for her parents to find her a suitable high caste match. Ila Raychaudhuri (nee Chatterjee)\textsuperscript{42} and her daughter-in-law Nina Raychaudhuri (nee Mukerji)\textsuperscript{43} also spoke about their satisfaction in belonging to Brahmin families both by birth and also through marriage. Ila Raychaudhuri mentioned her father’s pride in being able to refer to himself as a ‘Brahmin Christian’. This sense of pride in belonging to a high caste holds true of all those upper caste Bengali Christians that I have met during my survey. None of them is a first generation convert, which indicates how deep-seated caste pride was and also how the Bengali Christian community from its very inception had distinct divisions within it and therefore it was difficult to be a cohesive community of people. There is a subtle dividing line that still runs through the community that surfaces when matrimonial alliances are arranged. The upper caste families will not normally consider a match with anyone from the lower castes just like in any Hindu matrimonial alliance that is arranged. Family backgrounds are carefully researched before a marriage proposal is formally made by the interested families, of course education and financial status are important factors but caste certainly plays an important role.

While discussing the attitude of the Dutts of Rambagan regarding caste K.C. Dutt\textsuperscript{44} mentioned that because they had converted to Christianity they were liberal and the local \textit{Doms} (sweeper class) had access into their household unlike in other upper caste Hindu houses. But he clarified that these \textit{Doms} were never employed in their kitchen, the cook was always an upper caste

\textsuperscript{40} Pronoy Sarkar, refer to the List of Interviewees.
\textsuperscript{41} Deepika Mookerji, refer to the List of Interviewees.
\textsuperscript{42} Ila Raychaudhuri, refer to the List of Interviewees.
\textsuperscript{43} Nina Raychaudhuri, refer to the List of Interviewees.
\textsuperscript{44} Kalyan Chunder Dutt, refer to the List of Interviewees.
Hindu woman. This implies that caste discrimination was very much a part of the subconscious and it surfaced discreetly in only in some aspects of daily life.

Unfortunately the upper caste Hindu converts were not genial towards the Muslims. Most of the interviewees had the same reaction when I spoke about their relationship with members of this community. They had Muslim friends but few and far between but they would not employ Muslim servants within their households. Rekha Jana mentioned that they lived in a joint family in north Calcutta and at a certain point in time – in the nineteen forties – they were desperately in need of a servant boy in the house and a Muslim boy had come and offered his services. Being desperate the elderly ladies in the family had employed him and given him a Hindu name warning him that their old bachelor uncle who had extremely conservative ideas should never discover that he was not a Hindu.  

How did the missionaries respond to caste differences among their native converts? The missionaries objected to caste consciousness due to several reasons – partly because it went against the Christian principles of universal brotherhood and also because they felt that it continued the convert’s association with his old faith and way of life and therefore he would find it all the more easy to backslide into Hinduism. This would affect the growth and expansion of the church in their respective mission fields. The converts on the other hand had much to lose if they embraced Christianity. Those belonging to the upper castes would lose their superior position in society due to loss of caste, and up to 1850, they also lost all rights over ancestral property. Hindus, especially the educated class mixed freely with the Europeans as the century progressed and with the spread of western education and thought there was Hindu reawakening and reform.

In the initial years Rev. Carey and the Serampore missionaries exploited the Hindu’s belief in the caste system to effectively serve their purpose of preaching Christianity by utilising the services of the Brahmin converts – sporting their sacred threads over their shoulders – to convince the natives

45 Rekha Jana (nee Pyne), refer to the List of Interviewees.
46 Act XXI of 1850 protected converts and others from the forfeiture of property on the grounds of loss of caste and change of religion.
about Christianity, taking advantage of their belief in the “twice born” Brahmin being equal to the gods. Although these Bengali Brahmin converts were not shown any special preference during church ceremonies, the fact remains that Hindu caste stratification was present in the fledgling Bengali Christian community of Serampore and the following is an interesting report on that:

At the commencement of the year 1803, the missionaries baptized the first Brahmin, an amiable and intelligent youth of the name of Krishnu-prasad...

Before his baptism, he trampled on his *poita*, or sacred thread, to indicate his rejection of the creed with which it was associated, and then placed it in Mr. Ward’s hands... But Mr. Carey and his colleagues did not at that time consider it necessary to insist on a Brahmin’s divesting himself of his thread, which they considered as much a token of social distinction, as of spiritual supremacy. The converts were therefore baptized and preached to their fellow-countrymen with the poita across the shoulder. (However) Mr. Carey and his colleagues... resolved to exterminate every vestige of caste from the Christian community they were rearing up...

Caste is an intangible and unavoidable inheritance – something one is born into and has to struggle against all odds in order to cross to a higher level. The Bengalis who converted to Christianity may have given up caste as far as the Hindu society they renounced and the Christian missionaries, who converted them, were concerned. But they did not change their surnames for biblical names so their caste was still reflected through their names – the surname being a great indicator of one’s position in the caste hierarchy. The missionaries had participated in the process of social reform in nineteenth century India but caste discrimination was beyond their sphere of control. In fact Duff was known for his belief in the filtration theory – a few conversions in the urban upper castes and classes would result in those converts influencing people in the lower orders of society and Christianity would spread without difficulty. Therefore he worked more among the upper strata of Bengal society and was not as much involved with the ordinary people as Carey and other missionaries were.

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From the very beginning of his ministry in Bengal Duff had decided that the best way to proselytise was through education in English. In other words he was aiming for the upper class Bengalis who would send their sons for their education in the city. The primary objective of Duff’s coming to India had been,

To establish at once a central Institution for communicating a higher education – literary, scientific and theological, to a more select number, who might, in diverse ways, beneficially influence the minds of those around them; and some of whom, by the blessing of God and the power of His grace, might become qualified, in the capacity of teachers and preachers, to act as the instructors of their countrymen.

Duff could not establish an institution for higher education as he was unable to find teachers willing to or capable of teaching in such an institution. So he had to begin with the training and education of boys moulded to suit his purpose of influencing young minds when they themselves became teachers. Hence he began with a school where instruction would be given in English and the students would be trained in the Christian way of life. Thus began Duff’s system of education with the filtration theory as its basis.

A Hindu is born into his/her religion and only the Brahmin male has to go through the sacred thread ceremony at a particular stage in his life following which he is recognized as a ‘Brahmin’ and known as ‘twice born’. But Christians have to go through the baptism process and be registered in church records in order to qualify as a Christian and further go through another process that will confirm his or her faith in Christianity and make the individual eligible for partaking communion in the church. So a Christian makes a conscious declaration of his belief in Christianity. The practice of the two religions is so different yet deep within these individuals from the two different faiths runs the thread of caste consciousness.

The following is a report of the course of events that finally resulted in the acceptance of some “Mochie Christians” as their equals, by the other Christian converts from castes superior to the “Mochie” narrated by Rev. James Vaughan of the Church Missionary Society who was in charge of the Nadia

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48 Duff, op. cit., p. 530.
District in the last quarter of the 19th century. He found that the people often spoke about “Hindu Christians”, “Mussalman Christians”, and “Mochie Christians”; and these phrases turned out to be only one symptom of the existence and recognition of old caste distinctions. The “Mochies” in particular, were skinners and leather-workers, and therefore regarded as unclean by the high caste people and those among them who were Christians were excluded from the Churches, their children even remained unbaptized, because the pastors feared to offend the congregations if they had anything to do with the “Mochies.” Rev. Vaughan resolved to bring representatives of the various congregations together for an informal discussion preliminary to the formation of a regular Church Council. The meeting was at Ballabhpur, in the heart of the district, in October, 1877. The “Mochie Christians” sent their delegates, and an outbreak of bitter feeling immediately ensued. The rest would neither sit down to eat if they ate at the same time, nor join the conference if they were present, nor would they receive Holy Communion with them. Vaughn explained that they were going against the spirit of the teachings of Christ. He declined to send the ‘Mochies’ away. As a result the people protested by staying away from the churches and removing their children from the schools and of course they were also discourteous to the missionaries.

Six months later, a group of native Christian missionaries visited these villages and “exercised their persuasive powers”, at yet another conference held in Bollobhpur. Everyone, including the “Mochies” partook of the common meal spread in the open-air. Having had their position in the Church vindicated, the “Mochies” met together, and resolved to remove all cause of offence by giving up their trade and becoming simple cultivators. Even this generous act did not conciliate the more bitter and bigoted of the objectors. However, in a little over a year’s time the missionaries had managed to give interpersonal equations a definite positive direction and caste differences were apparently lost.49

So in rural Bengal where the people were financially weak and dependent on the Church for survival, caste differences were smudged out. The missionaries held sway as they could easily influence the simple villagers. Besides a herd

mentality probably worked there making the villagers respond to new perceptions in large factions.

In urban life none of the boundaries was more powerful than the other. Change of religion brought with it new social practices and a new identity. Caste was apparently nonexistent in the new community. But both continued silently in the lives of the people of the Bengali Christian community. Only the religious rituals had changed with change of belief, most of the ethnic social practices surfaced during social functions. Caste could be moved to the background through change of names and an improved financial status helped in the process, yet these boundaries were not permanent.

**Section III: Creating Boundaries through Legislation**

As the new Christian community gradually evolved new laws had to be formulated for these people who were becoming the ‘other’ for the family and friends as they were crossing the frontier of their ancestral religion after conversion; accepting Christianity was tantamount to abandoning Hindu society. Abhorrence for everything Hindu was often instilled or fostered among the converts. The new laws distanced them even more from the community of their birth. But for the orphans the converts were from cohesive families and some of them were even married at the time of conversion.

The Anglo-Indians referred to as ‘East Indians’ were not included under the laws for the Indian Christians as they were considered under laws for the English in India due to their close resemblance to the English in religion, manners and customs.\(^50\)

Let us first take a look at the status of the earliest married converts – those who were already married at the time of conversion and were ostracized by their family and community of birth and often also by the wives, the latter declaring themselves widows in such circumstances. They had to face several complications in order to get back their spouse or even to remarry a Christian woman and finally following several requests and deliberation between the newly converted Bengali intelligentsia and the Church authorities some laws were formulated.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., p. 96.
The following words on a marble plaque in the Assembly Hall of Scottish Church College are rich in historical information about the mental agony and miserable plight of a young convert and his family after his conversion.

In memory of the Rev. Bipro Charan Chuckerbutty, born 1823, died 1901. For over fifty years connected with this Mission. From 1872, the first native ordained Minister of the Church of Scotland in India. In 1829, he lighted the one pyre of his dead father and living mother – the last legal Suttee in Bengal. Becoming a widower in 1878, he remarried her who, since his baptism in 1843, had declared herself his widow.  

Rev. Chuckerbutty had been influenced by the Scottish missionaries and this led to his conversion and later ordination. He lost his first wife in the process (as true to the practice of the times she declared herself a widow) and he remarried, this time it was a Christian lady. But after the death of his second wife he remarried his first wife who had lived the life of a Hindu widow all these years. It is assumed that she must have agreed to convert to Christianity or else marriage to a Christian clergyman would not have been possible. Here let us pause and consider the legal disputes in the Bengali Christian community regarding cases like this. In fact a Bill had been introduced into the Legislative Council, regarding the remarriage of native converts to Christianity, in January 1865. To this the native clergy had vehemently protested. Rev. K.M. Banerjea has enumerated some very valid reasons for the protest that also expose the confused state of legal affairs regarding marital status due to the conversion of native young men to Christianity – who were sometimes married even when they were not even adolescents. When a married couple converted to Christianity they did not have to exchange marriage vows in order to reconfirm their marriage according to the Church, which means their heathen marriage was accepted by the Church. But according to the new Bill the converted native could remarry a Christian woman without divorcing his Hindu wife. This in turn conveyed the wrong message that Christians think very lightly about the breach of contract of

51 Scottish Church College founded by Alexander Duff as the General Assembly’s Institution on 13th July 1830, at present day 1&3 Urquhart Square, Calcutta 700 006.
52 Refer to the Appendix for a photograph of the marble plaque.
marriage. Also this would hinder rather than facilitate reconciliations of husband and wife. In the case of Rev. Chuckerbutty this reconciliation was possible after the death of his second wife which was thirty-five years after his conversion. Also had the Bill been passed it would have repelled Rev. Chuckerbutty’s unbelieving wife from accepting Christianity which she ultimately must have as she remarried her clergyman former husband. This was the point Krishna Mohan made regarding the conversion of the spouse a while later than the husband. He also made a very interesting point that easy legalisation of remarriage under the new Bill would ‘encourage hypocrisy in the profession of Christianity by furnishing a ready means of getting rid of an obnoxious wife or husband.’

Another problem was that of succession as the individuals who converted to Christianity had to leave their ancestral home the question of inheritance had to be decided upon. ‘The Indian Succession Act 10 of 1865 applied to Indian Christians only. This Act was passed with a view to amend and define the rules of law applicable to Intestate (person dies without making a will) and Testamentary (through will) succession in British India.’ However this law was flexible and if the Indian Christian so chose he could seek exemption from the Succession Act and remain under the Hindu Law. Indian Christians had the flexibility of making wills or they could secure exemption under Section 332 of the Act.

In 1832 the Governor-General, Lord William Bentinck, approved the Regulation VII of the Bengal Code. It stated:

Whenever in any civil suit the parties to such suit may be of different persuasions, when one party shall be of the Hindu and the other of the Mohamedan persuasion; or where one or more of the parties to the suit shall not be either of the Mohamedan or Hindu persuasion, the laws of those religions shall not be permitted to operate to deprive such party or parties of any property to which, but for the operation of such laws, they would have been entitled.

54 Ibid., pp. 3-4
56 Ibid., p. 102.
57 Ibid., p. 116.
This regulation was applicable in Bengal only and it secured the property rights of converts thus making the matter of conversion less problematic for the Bengali convert.

Several laws were passed to protect the converts, e.g., ‘Converts’ Marriage Dissolution Act 21, of 1866, was passed “to legalize the marriages of converts to Christianity, deserted or repudiated on religious grounds by the wives or husbands.” The marriages of Christians, whether converts or descendants of converts, are governed by the ‘Indian Christian Marriage Act 15’, of 1872, Section 3, ‘The Indian Divorce Act 4’ of 1869, Section 10, though applicable for the Protestants is not enforceable on the Roman Catholics as the Roman Catholic church considers a marriage which has been sanctified and consummated, to be indissoluble. The ‘Special Marriage Act of 1954’ is for inter religious marriages and provides very broad grounds of divorce including divorce by mutual consent.\(^{58}\)

So the progeny of the abandoned and deserted Christian convert of the nineteenth century found themselves comfortably shielded by the laws of the land and living the life of a Christian convert in India became more and more secure down the ages.

**Section IV: The Bengali Christian response to Anglo-Indian and Brahmo ways of life**

British presence in India resulted in the birth of socio-religious communities like the Indian- Christian, Brahmo and the Anglo-Indian. The latter community comprising largely of children of British and Indian origin, as compared to the earlier “racially mixed” children who were of Portuguese-Indian, French-Indian and Dutch-Indian origin; and the Christian attack on Hinduism led to a rethinking of Hindu religious beliefs and practices which resulted in the birth of the Brahmo community in Bengal. But each had its own distinctive identity governed by the cultural practices of the members of the community and the location of its origin. Let us see whether there was any common trait running through these new communities and also whether the members of each community related to each other.

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\(^{58}\) Ibid., pp. 125-27.
When India gained her independence in 1947, not everyone was glad to see the British go. Among those left behind were people of mixed European and Indian descent, who traced their English, French, Dutch or Portuguese ancestry from the paternal line going back to the 16th and 18th centuries. Of all the European traders who came to India during that period the British gained dominance through the East India Company’s supremacy in trade and commerce in India. At that time, few women were prepared to make the arduous sea voyage and also adjust with the cultural transition that such displacements entail. Consequently the officers, ensigns and clerks of the Company were encouraged to marry local Indian women and their children carried no stigma of mixed blood in those far-off days.

“Indo-Briton” was the first generally accepted designation of the new community thus formed. A while later the term “Eurasian” was widely used. Though at the beginning of the nineteenth century the term in use was “East Indian,” “Eurasian” was generally in use throughout the century. It was not until 1911 that the community officially accepted and recognized the term “Anglo Indian.” There was some confusion even in the use of this term as it had been used earlier to refer to Britishers domiciled in India, synonymous with the term “Domiciled European.”

According to Article 366(2) of the Indian Constitution, “An Anglo-Indian means a person whose father or any of whose other male progenitors in the male line is or was of European descent but who is domiciled within the territory of India and is or was born within such territory of parents habitually resident therein and not established there for temporary purposes only.” This implies that not only those of British patrilineal heritage but also of other European parentage in the paternal line were Anglo-Indian. All these Europeans being Christians – Catholic and Protestant, their children were also Christians having adopted the father’s religion.


Frank Anthony, a lawyer by profession, was a prominent leader of the Anglo-Indian community in India. He was their nominated representative in the Parliament of India (except in the 6th and 9th Lok Sabhas) until his death in 1993.
Thus the only common element between the Anglo-Indian and a Bengali Christian was their religion. The Anglo-Indians evolved long before Carey, Duff and the other Protestant evangelists had found their first Bengali converts. The Anglo-Indian’s mother tongue was English and he/she was a born Christian. Anglo-Indians had a westernised way of life. ‘This new social category grew up in attachment to and dependence upon the nation of their father. Their lives and interests were linked with the East India Company’s fortunes and interests in India. Their mothers were at the point of no return in the traditional and conservative set up of India. They had to join their husband’s faith and usually learned to speak the husband’s language i.e. English...’

According to Stark, by the early 1700’s there were more Anglo-Indians in India than there were overseas British. It was from about 1776 onwards that the British East India Company and its European supporters began to have second thoughts about the growing size and influence of the Anglo-Indians as they feared that these Anglo-Indians alongside the Indian soldiers could either damage or destroy the Company. This lurking fear along with certain conflicts within the Company led to the promulgation of a series of regulations restricting the activities of the Community. From 1791-1857 was a period of calculated and increasing repression, political, economic and social by the British. With the construction of the Suez Canal in the 19th century, the travel time between the two countries was greatly reduced and women no longer hesitated to join husbands or seek marriage prospects among British army and the civil service officers in India. They brought with them all the class snobbery and insularity of the Victorian era and the offspring of mixed descent were no longer regarded on a par with those of pure British ancestry. They would not be integrated into the overseas British society. The Anglo-Indians had served the purpose of establishing and strengthening British control in India, they could now be summarily rejected. ‘Their status was

62 Herbert A. Stark, _Hostages to India_ (Calcutta, The Calcutta Fine Arts Cottage, 1926), pp. 43-5.
63 Ibid., p. 53.
64 Anthony, _op.cit._, pp. iv-v.
becoming more and more marginal with reference to the British – the group that had long ago become their reference.  

In fact the British community in India appeared to be divided into three groups, the British ruling class, the British settler who used to classify himself as 'Domiciled European' and the Anglo-Indian. Over a period of several generations, due to inter-marriage, it was difficult to determine into which category a person belonged. All members of the Anglo-Indian community had European blood in them. They identified with European culture, especially English culture and of course were all Christians. From 1600 to 1785, the relationship of the Anglo-Indians with the English was cordial. But during 1786 to 1795 three disastrous orders were promulgated that curbed the powers and privileges that the community was enjoying and their position was reduced to that of 'the proscribed and downtrodden race'. Now they were also the ‘other’ as far as the English were concerned. In 1813 they were legally considered to be the native subjects of India. However, they themselves considered their position in Indian society above that of the ‘natives’.

The Anglo-Indians were more "Anglo" than "Indian" in their outlook. Their mother-tongue was English, and so was their religious upbringing, as were their customs and traditions. While most of them married within their own Anglo-Indian circle, there were many who continued to marry expatriate Englishmen. Very few, if any, married Indians. The same rigid social barriers that the British erected between themselves and the Anglo-Indians also existed to isolate the Anglo-Indians from the vast majority of Indians. Neither the British in general nor the Anglo-Indians made any attempt at appreciating Indian music, art, dance, literature or drama. The "natives" were seen as idol worshippers, with unclean living habits, not to mention eating with their fingers while sitting cross legged on the ground. The aloofness between themselves and their Indian subjects were of little concern to the British but when they left in 1947 the Anglo-Indians found themselves in a twilight zone of uncertainty, and felt a bitter sense of betrayal and dismay at the fact that

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65 Gist and Wright, op. cit., p. 13.
66 Debi and Nandan op. cit., p. 6.
Britain made no effort to offer her dark-skinned sons any hospitality in the
land where their forefathers had been born.

‘Brought into existence deliberately by the British, used throughout
British Indian history to serve and often to save British Imperial
interests, treated for the most part in a churlish manner, this
comparatively microscopic Community, which has forged a not
negligible, and, in many respects, a notable history, was cynically
betrayed by Britain before its withdrawal from India.’

These words certainly convey the deeply hurt sentiments of thousands of
Anglo-Indians whom Frank Anthony represented.

The Bengali Christians would not be confused with the Anglo-Indians as the
former merely changed their religion but retained all the characteristics that
define a Bengali identity in appearance and in their way of life. But as some of
them and other Indian Christians did become externally westernized adorning
western clothes and speaking in English among themselves, they even adopted
biblical names, it would sometimes become difficult to distinguish the Indian
Christian from the Anglo-Indian, especially the darker skinned Anglo-Indian.

However Bengali Christians themselves had their own well defined
community with their ethnic Bengali customs and their vernacular Bengali
mother-tongue. The dilemma of identity has been there with the Anglo-Indians
from the beginning – ‘Europeans tended to think of them as Indians with some
European blood; Indians thought of them as Europeans with some Indian
blood.’

The early Brahmo Samaj was an intellectual response to the Christian attack
on Hinduism. Rammohan Roy combined elements of Christianity and
Hinduism into a common, rational religion with strong deist tendencies. The
Brahmos rejected idolatory, and the caste system, ‘they were particularly
opposed to “superstitious customs” of “ignorant people”, deceived by their
Brahmin leaders.’ However they did not turn into Christians, nor did they

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67 Anthony, op. cit., p. ii.
68 Gist and Wright, op. cit., p. 55.
69 van der Veer, op. cit., p. 67.
70 Ibid, 45
identify with British ways. Raja Rammohun Roy’s religious views took some
definite shape by 1828 when in August of that year he established the Brahma
Sabha later known as the Brahma Samaj or Society of God. ‘The great
religious reformer based his religious creed on the Vedanta.’⁷¹ After his
departure for England in November 1830 and his death there in September
1833, the Brahmo Samaj as an organization faced a severe crisis for survival.
However after founding the Tattwabodhini Sabha⁷² in 1839, Debendranath
Tagore joined the Samaj in 1842 and it became the common platform for the
intellectual and cultural elite of mid-nineteenth century Bengal. Unlike
Rammohun Roy’s belief in a formless God Debendranath believed in a
personal God. Under Debendranath Tagore the basis of the Brahmamic faith
shifted from the Vedantas to the ‘book of Nature and Intuition.’⁷³ The next
great Brahma leader was Keshub Chandra Sen who was well read in Christian
literature. He said, ‘Christianity has prepared the world for the Brahma Samaj
but has not given birth to Brahmoism.’⁷⁴ Keshub Chandra tried to form a
religion which would be a blend of both Hinduism and Christianity. ‘The
Brahma Dharma may be best described as Christianized Hinduism.’⁷⁵

The Brahmo community comprised of educated middle class Bengalis who
like the Christians believed in the emancipation of women, and both Brahmo
men and women could be mistaken to be middle class Bengali Christians if
assessed only from external appearances. The Bengali Christian community
comprised of bhadralok Bengalis at one end of the social ladder and the
ordinary poor and low class people, with large numbers from rural Bengal on
the other, whereas most Brahmos were educated middle class who had turned
to a reformed Hinduism which the ordinary uneducated man would find
difficult to comprehend.

⁷² Tattwabodhini Sabha, Debendranath Tagore founded the Tattvaranjini Sabha in his
ancestral home in Jorasanko with his brothers and close friends. Its purpose was to attain
knowledge of Brahma and propagate religious truth. It was decided that the Sabha would meet
once every month. In the second meeting in October 1839 it was renamed Tattwabodhini
Sabha.
⁷³ Ibid., p. 69.
⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 76.
⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 99.
The educated middle class women of both these communities were the first to come out of the antahpur and discard the orthodox customs of purdah, dress and education. But it is the Brahmo women that are generally considered to be the model bhadramahila who set the trend for the new way of life to be emulated by other non-Brahmo bhadramahila. The Brahmo lady draped her sari in the Brahмиka style devised by Jnanadanandini, wife of the first Indian to clear the Civil Service Examinations, Satyendranath Tagore son of Debendranath Tagore. Traditionally Bengali women wore only the sari wound round their bodies which by the 18880’s was considered to be inappropriate – not befitting one’s social status. So the bhadramahila wore the sari, with blouse and petticoat, shoes and a little heavy jewellery. Along with the long-sleeved blouse the chemise, an all-in-one undergarment was introduced. This was soon to be the forerunner of the modern day sari worn in most parts of the country. The sari along with the stylishly cut blouse which looked like the top of a Victorian dress and the brooches that were worn to keep the sari in place and the shoes worn to cover the feet, had the effect of an English pleated gown and shoes.

The Brahmos were much influenced by western thought and Brahmo and Christian women were encouraged to go for higher education after completion of their basic school education. In Rabindranath Tagore’s Ghare Baire (The Home and the World), Bimala starts off as a traditional, obedient house wife but her husband, Nikhilesh tries to educate her in the western style and even appoints an English teacher Miss Gilby, for the purpose. Nikhilesh’s desire to educate his wife on western lines was a characteristic of the nineteenth century bhadralok culture.

One marked difference between the educated Bengali Christian first generation convert and the educated Hindu or Brahmo gentlemen was the former’s unfortunate financial status. Excepting for the Dutt family of Rambagan all

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76 See Appendix for photographs of Bengali Christian ladies attending a wedding reception in the sari draped in the Brahмika style.
other Bengali Hindu converts to Christianity from the educated middle class faced financial crisis immediately after conversion as they were rejected by their own family and also socially ostracized. They had to seek the help of the missionaries to establish themselves in the new way of life. Hence the very first converts had to struggle before they could afford an aristocratic lifestyle. But they soon settled into their new way of life e.g. Krishna Mohun Banerjea, Lal Behari Day etc. and were very much a part of the nineteenth century Calcutta bhadralok society. But whatever may have been the similarities in appearance, education and lifestyle the Brahmos were Hindus in the eyes of the Christians as their religion was a type of reformed Hinduism it was rooted in the Vedas and the Upanishads and along with Bengali; Sanskrit was their language of worship. They were not similar in their religious ideology.

Section IV: Development of National Consciousness and its Impact

According to Peter Heehs, the two nationalist trends – ‘organized nationalism’ and Hindu religious revivalism both arose in Bengal in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Although separate movements, they were intimately associated. Hindu revivalism is generally dated to the debate over the Native Marriage Bill of 1872, which recognized members of the Keshub Chandra Sen faction of the Brahma Samaj as non-Hindu. Members of the Adi (original) Samaj considered the Brahma dharma to represent the highest form of Hinduism. Keshub, who had broken from the original group in 1866, considered Brahmoism to be universal.78 He goes on to say that cultural nationalists, reacting against the popularity of Western ways so common in the mid-nineteenth century, promoted indigenous social institutions rather than imitative social reform, and created organizations that were regarded as precursors of the Indian National Congress, founded in 1885.

The British criticized Indian traditions with the aim of “civilizing” the Indian people. Well into the twentieth century Katherine Mayo in Mother India (1927), ‘arrived at the conclusion that far from being ready for political self-

determination, India needed the continued civilizing influence of the British. But contrary to Mayo’s perception, after evangelization by Christian missionaries, the British government’s legal and administrative action and enlightenment through Western knowledge, the wheel had come full circle and the native was back to “tradition” in its reformed profile, and with a liberal mind, ‘... the dominant tone changed from satire and self-irony to ponderous traditionalism.’

Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjea’s inherent nationalist spirit is evident in the following incident: He had been appointed First Canon of St. Paul’s Cathedral, by Bishop Wilson. Soon after, the Bishop went to England on a short break, and while there, appointed an Englishman as First Canon of the same Church. Krishna Mohan realized that there would be two sets of Canons, one Indian and the other English. The Bishop’s racism was apparent and on his return from England Krishna Mohan tendered his resignation as Canon and thus registered his protest. In his Journal the Bishop has referred to this incident thus, “The Rev. K. M. Banerjea resigns my Cathedral mission, because I make a difference in the salaries assigned to Europeans and Natives.” The Bishop requested Rev. Banerjea to withdraw his resignation but the gentleman remained firm in his decision. He had converted to Christianity having turned against several existing Hindu laws and customs, and this required tremendous fortitude, especially as it was a result of pure conviction and not out of a sense of insecurity in his ancestral religion. The high handed attitude of the white clergy was unacceptable to this respectable intellectual.

Like Krishna Mohan Lal Behari Day had also been a victim of racialism in the church. He got a taste of it even before he was ordained. Day was ordained along with two other native Christians and they had thought that they would be made members of the Mission Council which controlled the Institution in Calcutta and also those in the neighboring stations. All missionaries were...

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81 Canon: A member of the clergy on the staff of a Cathedral. The title of ‘Canon’ may also be a gift of the bishop to a senior or distinguished clergy.
members of this Council. However Day and his two friends were not inducted into this body of missionaries, and Day could not forget this insult. In order to calm him down Duff sent him to the Kulna mission where he had complete independence but he had to be brought back to Calcutta after a few years, to minister to the Bengali Christian congregation in the church in Cornwallis Square. Day was there for a number of years, his family was growing and the salary he earned was not sufficient. So he had requested Duff for a teaching assignment in the Institution. But this was not granted. Day lost three of his children due to the damp and cramped manse in which he used to reside but nothing was done to improve his situation so he finally left the Mission and took up a teaching assignment in a government run institution in Hooghly. In Day’s choice of employment is revealed the two faces of colonialism. The one he left was the mission where he had begun his life as a Christian, but they were racist and inconsiderate towards the suffering gentleman and his family. The government was more cautious and did not discriminate but had a fixed scale of pay for all the teachers in its service.

Mathuranath Bose had given up his professorship at London Mission College, Bhowanipore and left for Gopalganj. He would serve as an independent missionary, unattached to any recognized Christian mission. He intended to submit himself to social service among the poor villagers according to the principles of Christianity. Gopalganj was inhabited mainly by low caste, impoverished Namasudra Hindus and Muslims. Affluent Namasudras and high caste villagers were few and far between. He worked among them for twenty-seven years. Yes he converted them and educated them and tried to improve their situation – he had dedicated himself to serve his own people and did not belong to any foreign mission. What more can a man do to show his love for his own country and its people?

83 MacPherson, op. cit., pp. 70-89.
84 Mukerji, op. cit., p. 88.
85 Namasudras: ‘They lived mainly in the marshy tracts of eastern Bengal and it was through a protest movement that a loosely organised group of people in Bengal in the late nineteenth century constructed a community identity.’ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Caste Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal1872-1947 (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997) p.5. The Namasudras earlier known as Chandala, emerged as a census-defined community in 1872 and disintegrated with the Partition of India in 1947.
Lal Behari Day, professor and author, was concerned about improving the social, moral and religious life of the people among whom he was born and raised and he commenced editing a Bengali fortnightly paper called *Arunaday* which not only aimed at an all round Christian grooming of its readers but also gave information on political developments in the Raj. He also some of his literary writings in this paper e.g. *Chandramukhi*. Day sympathized deeply with the downtrodden ryots of Bengal which he has expressed in his *Govinda Samanta*. His heart went out to the poor natives. He has described how cruel the indigo planters were with them:

‘The raiyats of an indigo district will tell you that one of the modes in which the planter punishes those whom he deems most dangerous is to make them “drink the water of seven factories”. A raiyat of some pluck, “some village Hampden,” is spirited away, and sent from factory to factory – for one indigo concern has generally several factories – and this mysterious translation from place to place ends in his exit from the stage of the world.’

Kalicharan Banurji had said that the Bengali Christians had embraced Christianity but they had not discarded their nationality. Social outcasts in their own land and not equal to the Europeans, they had their own native boards and associations. Outstanding men like Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjea held prominent posts in both the native and the European bodies, serving on both as an equally dedicated member. Kali Charan Banurji, a Bengali Christian and a fine orator, regularly addressed the annual sessions of the Congress in moulding the policy of National Movement. As victims of racialism the Bengali Christian clergy formed a native body, the Bengal Christian Association. In 1868 Krishna Mohan Banerjea became the President of this Association. In 1869 Krishna Mohan and Day proposed that an independent United National Church of Bengal should be established. Thinking on the same lines Kali Charan Banurji established the Christo Samaj in 1887. Gradually the Bengali Christian leadership had evolved with a strong and powerful voice and the courage to exert its nationalist outlook.

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In the second decade of the twentieth century there was Amarnath Biswas who in his autobiographical essay *Jedin Jatra Holo Shuru* (The Day the Journey Began) has recorded how he protested the 13th April, 1919 massacre at Jalianwala Bagh by the British when he was just a high school boy studying in Collin’s Institute in Calcutta. He had rushed out of his class to the front of his school and delivered a soul stirring speech that inspired the other boys in the institution to follow him out of the school premises with cries of ‘Vande Mataram’ on their lips to join the streams of protesting fellow Indians on the streets. He was cruelly caned and expelled from school for this daring act but that led to protests and students’ unrest in Collin’s Institute and Principal Mick had to leave the institution. This was the dramatic beginning of Amarnath’s journey as a revolutionary. In 1930-31 he was in Alipore jail along with eight hundred convicted revolutionary prisoners which included great leaders like Subhas Chandra Bose and Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy among others. Later Amarnath Biswas had joined the Church and he was also an active member of the Revolutionary Socialist Party of India in post independence India. Amarnath was a product of the years of turbulence preceding India’s independence and a patriotic Bengali Christian with determination to overthrow the white imperialists.

Similarly, there was Dhirendralal Dutt (1905-1994) or D.L. Dutt as he was more popularly known who had joined Netaji’s Indian National Army (I.N.A.). After completing his M.A. in English from Calcutta University he was in Government service in Calcutta. D.L. Dutt quit his job and joined the I.N.A. where he served as Captain. When Dhirendralal left home he was already betrothed to Bani Bose whom he married some years later in 1946, on his return from his sojourn on the warfront in the dense forests of Burma. He had fought against the British in India’s war of independence and returned to India as a prisoner of war. The following is an extract from his incomplete and unpublished memoir where he has described his feelings as he witnessed the oath taking ceremony of Netaji and other senior members of the I.N.A. in a

88 Collin’s Institute: a missionary school for boys in central Calcutta.
90 Refer to Appendix.
91 As narrated by his wife Bani Dutt (nee Bose). Refer to the List of Interviewees.
hall in ‘Cathay’ the then tallest building in Singapore on the 21st October 1943, when the Provisional Government of Free India was announced which was to be known as the ‘Arzi Hukumat Azad Hind.’

Thus did come into existence the Provisional Government of Free India that took us forward a long step towards freedom. The day will remain memorable in the annals of India’s struggle for freedom. Those who, like me, witnessed the great event cannot forget it.  

Patriotism gives us a strong sense of pride in belonging to a particular nation. The Bengali Christians identified themselves with the Indian national movement and demonstrated their deepest concern for the cause. In fact, there were many among them who were prominent persons who pioneered and shaped the goals of Indian nationalism. The Bengali Christian community was no less than any other Indian community in their desire for national freedom and in their readiness to work and make sacrifices for it. They were very much a part of the mainstream of the Bengali population making their presence felt in nearly every sphere of activity in national life. However the constant awareness regarding affiliation to a minority community in terms of the national scenario today is a political development which is a continuous reminder to the Indian Christians that they are different from the larger section of the Indian population. It works as an otherisation of the community.

92 Refer to Appendix for facsimile of this page from the unpublished ‘Memoir’ of D.L. Dutt which he started writing in 1968 but was unable to complete.