Sisirkumar's contribution to the political history of India can only be analysed against the historical background in which he developed his ideas. The Renaissance, which threw Bengal into an intellectual ferment in the nineteenth century, formed the spiritual core and genius of this background.

Speaking generally, the Bengal renaissance may be said to have been an intellectual movement consisting in a synthesis of what was best and of value in the ideas of East and West. On the material side, it also infused into the intelligentsia a new urge and vitality to work for the reformation of society.

The thought of Rammohun Roy, the apostle of the renaissance, was a brilliant and wonderful expression of this intellectual movement. Rammohun emancipated the Indian mind from medievalism and modernized it in the light of Western culture.

The impact of the renaissance continued to make itself felt throughout the nineteenth century. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, the renowned novelist, and a social philosopher, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, a man of letters and social reformer, Keshab Chandra Sen, a religious reformer,
were the products of the Bengal renaissance. What these eminent persons did was a kind of readjustment and readaptation of the Indian ways of life and thought under the impact of Western culture. It is, of course, true that Iswar Chandra who was the motive force behind the legalisation of widow-marriage, invoked the religious scripture in support of this form of social reform. Nevertheless, he was no doubt inspired by the humanistic and rational tradition of the West.*

What distinguished Sisirkumar was the singular emphasis he placed on the politics of the country. Perhaps it was his acute sense of the miserable condition of the country that sharpened his political consciousness. Naturally enough, he attributed this miserable condition to the maladministration and lack of goodwill and sympathy of the foreign rulers.

* In this connection, it is interesting to note that Sisirkumar attributed the process of regeneration of his country mainly to three great persons, e.g., Rammohun Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Keshab Chandra Sen. In one place of an article entitled "The distressing condition of the country", he commented:

"... Rammohun was the first to identify the signs of weakness of our society. After him came Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Babu Keshab Chandra Sen to highlight those weaknesses. They were the representative men of this country who diagnosed our social maladies..." (The Amrita Bazar Patrika, September 21, 1876) Translated from Bengali.
However, the question which is relevant here is: In what way and how far, did the impact of Western culture become fruitful in the life of Sisirkumar so far as his political ideas were concerned? As this study reveals, the answer is not far to seek.

It should be remembered that Sisirkumar was not merely a theoretician. He took some active part in the practical politics of the day. It was his firm conviction in some of the liberal political values which inspired him to practical politics.

First, Sisirkumar espoused the cause of the indigo ryots from his sense of political justice which was Western in origin. He shared this sense of justice in common with others who lent their moral support to the struggle of the poor ryots against the European planters. Moreover, this conception of political justice also formed one of the main points of his criticism of the British regime. To him, India was a most helpless victim in the hands of the British India Government. It was this justice which he demanded of England with regard to India. He was an uncompromising Critic of the Government because it sacrificed this justice to the vile and selfish interests of England. He brought a profound indictment on the Government for its policies of exploitation, both financial and economic, which resulted in the increasing impoverishment of India.
Secondly, Sisirkumar was a champion of freedom in its various aspects. He knew that freedom is the most cherished object of man. To him, it was almost a birthright. He was acutely sensitive of this loss of freedom under the British rule. It was for this reason that he called upon England, which had robbed India of this freedom, to do something in return.

His desire for freedom expressed itself in other ways. Indeed, freedom had animated his soul like a spirit. To him, it was not an abstract idea but something concrete, a matter of every day reality. It was for this reason that he hated despotism. His advocacy for a local parliament in India should be seen in this light. He wanted to enlist the support of the Europeans on the conviction that under a despotic sway no man, not even the highest official, was free. This shows what a profound conviction he had on the freedom of the individual.

As a corollary of the freedom of the individual, man has also an inalienable right to freedom of expression. It was from such conviction that he fought for the freedom of the press. According to him, in a subject country, the chief function of the press is to espouse the cause of the people, who do not have any institutional means to voice their demands. So it was Sisirkumar who valiantly preached the dictum that in the event of any clash of interests between the people and
the Government, it was the function of the press to support
the former in opposition to the latter.

Thirdly, Sisirkumar manifested in himself a democratic
consciousness to a degree which was remarkable. His mind was
completely moulded by the constitutional ideal of the West. Indeed, constitutionalism became so much ingrained in his
mind that he once said that there was a higher law above the
law of the country, that is, natural law, which a man (to
speak exactly, he used the term "highest functionary"), how­
ever powerful he might be, must obey. The significance of this
remark will be clear when it is remembered that by the highest
functionary, he meant the Viceroy of India.

Sisirkumar's conception of democracy was very much
concrete and clear-cut. There was nothing vague about it.
By democracy, he understood (i) a representative system
which must reflect popular wishes; (ii) rule of law; (iii) an
independent judiciary; (iv) trial by jury. and (v) equality.

(i) One of the reasons why Sisirkumar directed
his scathing attack against the Government was that most of
its policies were always retrograde and ill-advised in so
far as the people of India were concerned. Such policies were
against the popular interest because the people had no voice
whatsoever in their formulation. His motto was: "No taxation
without representation." In point of fact, he demanded the
formation of an Indian parliament for adequate representation
of the Indian point of view in the policies of the Government.
(ii) and (iii). From the beginning, Sisirkumar was very much critical of the British system of justice for the bias and partiality of the European judges towards the men of their own race. They always made an invidious distinction between the white and the black. Sisirkumar cited many instances * in which Europeans, accused of murdering poor and innocent "natives" were either acquitted or awarded nominal punishment. All along Sisirkumar raised a voice of protest against such glaring injustice.

Sisirkumar had started a persistent campaign against the Criminal Procedure Code (1872) which, according to him, was calculated to increase the power of the executive at the expense of the judiciary. It was a retreat from the concept of the rule of law.

Sisirkumar protested against the proposed move of the Government of India to curtail the power of the Indian High Courts. These High Courts were credited by him with the impartial discharge of justice.

(iv) It may appear strange that Sisirkumar made much of the system of trial by jury as one of the guarantees for justice. But it should be remembered that in those days

*Sisirkumar reported one such instance in the Amrita Bazar Patrika on September 21, 1876. He wrote:

"... It is indeed shocking to contemplate that a lot of miserable villagers whose only fault was to defend themselves against the oppression of tea-planters should be first shot down like dogs, and then sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for perjury, while the shooters being European should be let off with nominal fines"... ("The Niggers and Whites")
the judicial department was dominated by the Europeans. The jury system was a means through which the "natives" could participate in the British system of justice. Besides, the "natives" on trial could hope at least some sympathy and understanding from the Indian jurors.

(v) Sisirkumar was very much aware that the conception of equality has a very important place in the democratic system. But democracy apart, he was a strong advocate of equality between Indians and Europeans even under the British rule. Indeed, equality was with him an ethical question. For this reason, he argued a priori for equality not only between European and Indian but between nation and nation, as when he demanded equal status between India and England.

Moreover, the conception of equality would become, according to Sisirkumar, a mere abstraction if applied without having a regard for the differences in circumstances in which men find themselves. He raised the very practical question that men are not equal in actual reality. By this he meant that power, money, wealth, education constitute real differences between man and man. Therefore, to treat all men equally irrespective of their social positions would be not only a travesty of justice but a definite coercion on the weaker of them. As such the weak are entitled to some safeguard against the strong. And by the same reasoning, Sisirkumar claimed for the Indians the adequate safeguard against the tyranny of the Europeans.
Fourthly, Sisirkumar was an exponent of popular sovereignty, a fundamental postulate of democracy. According to him, power ultimately resides in the community or society as a whole which vests it in the government. In case of abuse or when used in such a way that the interest of the people is jeopardised, the community can divest it of that power. Such a conception is quite in tune with the European political tradition which may be traced to the Greco-Roman culture through the medieval period of Europe. But it is quite new in India. Such a conception of power was actually an indirect challenge to the very rationale of the British Government which imposed its rule in India by force and was in no way responsible to the people of India for its policies and actions.

Sisirkumar's conception of man and his world was tinged with a sentiment reminiscent of the humanistic tradition of the West. From the remotest antiquity a blind faith in a supernatural power dominated Indian thought. There was nothing in this world which man could change by his own will and efforts. This made the Indians extremely fatalistic and altogether indifferent to their environments. The proverbial political acquiescence of the Indian people was an aspect of this general attitude. Sisirkumar who imbibed the scientific spirit from the Western civilization, criticized this attitude which culminated in the rise of the philosophy of "Nirvana". He argued that science has made man an architect of his own fate because it has given him power to change the world.
according to his own will. Thus Sisirkumar wanted to free man from the shackle of an age-old dogma and to restore him to his dignity and freedom.

It was Sisirkumar who preached secularism in India. Religion proved to be an insuperable barrier between man and man. The origin of the belief that man has no other existence apart from the spiritual may be traced to the medieval view of the world. This belief fosters fanaticism and has, in fact, been responsible for unparalleled barbarism which plunged different periods of history into prehistoric darkness, throwing all human values to the wind. Even the present stage of human civilization has not been entirely free of religious fanaticism. But Sisirkumar held that religion does not absorb the entire existence of men. There is a realm in them which can and must transcend religion. He forwarded this argument as a plea for human brotherhood between the Hindus and Muslims.

Again, Sisirkumar's humanism was also manifest in his deep love and sympathy for the poor and the oppressed. Of course, a compassion for the sick and the poor is a sentiment which can be traced in every culture. But the conception that those who live in the lower depths of society have a title to the same political rights and political justice as other human beings was completely new. His espousal of the cause of the indigo ryots against the powerful European planters
and of the peasants against the zemindars was the application of that concept in reality.

Lastly, his humanism was also manifest in his belief in the innate dignity of man which is inalienable and irreducible. On Sisirkumar's view, a man does not forfeit his dignity even when he takes to the path of crime.

He believed that man is good by nature. It is the circumstances which make man criminal. He held society responsible for the perversion of the divine stature of man. So it is not punishment but proper education which the criminal deserves.

Humanism, an offshoot of the spirit of renaissance, has no necessary connection with nationalism. While nationalism is separatist in character, humanism seeks unity of men or groups of men in addition to, and inspite of their geographical, racial, cultural and political differences. As a matter of fact, the humanist emphasises the oneness of human nature and their ideal is cosmopolitanism or internationalism, whereas the nationalist takes pride in belonging to a specific human group and glorifies those characteristics of his own group, real or fancied, which differentiate it from other human groups.

It may seem paradoxical that both nationalism and humanism should coincide in his thought. The two are not always in tune with each other.
However, for a subject people, humanism and nationalism may not always contradict each other. In fact, nationalism will express itself through the demand of rights and justice, which flow directly from humanism alone. In that context, the co-existence of humanism and nationalism in Sisirkumar need not reveal any contradiction.

The truth is, the British who set in motion the process of regeneration in India, also brought with them a political system of coercion and despotism not only to keep India in chains but to exploit her economically in a most ruthless way. As a reaction to such a condition, the democratic consciousness of Sisirkumar was merged into a national consciousness. This was the only logical response of an Indian's mind to a force opposed to India's hopes and aspirations.

Whatever that may be, Sisirkumar has handed down to his posterity a social and political philosophy based on democratic and constitutional values, animated by scientific and secular spirit and sustained by an invincible faith in the innate dignity of man. This is a tradition which India can ignore only at her own peril and from which she can draw a spiritual sustenance even today.