Chapter 2

The Nation between Two Worlds

Section I - Recasting History

Sunil Gangopadhyay, Poet, novelist, travel writer, dramatist, journalist, script writer was born in 1934 in erstwhile East Pakistan. He too was a victim of partition and migrated to Calcutta where he had to earn a livelihood from his teen years to keep body and soul together. He completed an M.A in Bengali literature from Calcutta University and went on to spearhead a new literary movement in Bengali literature along with fellow poets Shakti Chattopadhyay and Nirendranath Chakravarthty. He is first and foremost a poet but his novels have won him much acclaim. His novels Pratidwandi and Aranyer Din Ratri have been filmed by Satyajit Ray, Sei Samay won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983.

Sunil Gangopadhyay’s Sei Samay (Those days) and Pratham Alo (First Light) and Ahmed Ali’s Twilight in Delhi traces the rise of the Hindu elite and fall of the Muslim one under colonial rule. The two different worlds inhabited by India’s largest religious communities is depicted along with their angst and vision of the future. With both communities vying for a place in the colonial sun the formation of an identity, religious, social and cultural, that precedes a political one, is crucial for survival in a colonized space.
Gangopadhyay and Ali are concerned with the social and cultural changes that accompany the political impact of colonialism. While they focus on these changes, they delineate the arena, the issues and the methods of these changes and look at the contestation for power among colonial subjects. This contestation is important to understand the rise of Hindu power and the decline of Muslim influence in the political, social and cultural sphere, especially after 1857. The events of Those Days and First Light stretched from 1840 to 1906, an epic era in the history of Bengal and India. Ali’s Twilight in Delhi is located in Delhi between 1910 to 1919, a period of painful transition from old to new. Both writers take us into post imperialist and pre-independence Hindu and Muslim households. While Sunil Gangopadhyay’s novels are steeped in a cultural awakening and growing national consciousness, Ali’s novel offers a different view of the colonial encounter. “Through the eyes of the aristocratic Mir Nihal it elaborates a specifically Muslim perception of colonial rule as the loss of Mughal hegemony over India. No longer masters and rulers of Delhi, Nihal and his peers lament their estrangement from the city of their birth and progressively lose their bearings in the new geography of their imperial capital.”¹ They struggle to cope with their loss and move inwards, losing touch with the world around them. The national movement bypasses them and they can only identify with the first war of independence in 1857, a war that was the swansong of Bhadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal ruler of India. The defeat in 1857 and subsequent exile of Bahadur Shah Zafar sounded the death knell for Muslim society and its
aspirations. For Asghar, the young son of Mir Nihal, “He had his own sorrow to think of, his own life to set it right. He was unconcerned whether the country lived or died.” (*Twilight in Delhi* 288) To Mir Nihal, the national movement was a symbol of capitulation to western thought and behavior. This foreign influx was not welcome. “New ways and ideas had come into being. A hybrid culture which had nothing in it of the past was forcing itself upon Hindustan, a hodge-podge of Indian and Western ways which he failed to understand.” (*TID* 278)

In contrast to the dying and claustrophobic world of Indian Muslims, Gangopadhyay portrays a vibrant era that takes up the gauntlet thrown by colonialism. Time, not any individual, is the hero of *Those Days* and Sunil Gangopadhyay has tried to hold on to that time, which was at the cusp of tradition and modernity. In *Sei Samay* (*Those Days*) published in 1982 and *Pratham Alo* (*First Light*) published in 1996, Gangopadhyay focused on the entire social milieu of Calcutta and Bengal from Mid-nineteenth century to the first decade of the twentieth, a period of cultural awakening, resurgence of nationalism, growing influence of science and encroachment of modernity on traditional ways of thinking and being.

*Those Days* begins with the birth of Nabin Kumar, son of Babu Ramkamal Singha and Bimbabati. Nabin, the chief protagonist of the novel symbolizes the advent of a new age. Therefore Nabin is connected to all the
major characters in some way or another. Susobhan Sarkar has divided the
Bengal Renaissance into five parts to demarcate them from each other;

1. 1815 – 1833: The easiest starting is, of course, the date
1815 when Rammohan Roy settled down in Calcutta and took up seriously his life work. His death in England in
1833 obviously ends the period of which he was, indisputably, the central figure.


3. 1857 – 1885: From the mutiny to the foundation of the Indian National Congress.

4. 1885 – 1905: From the commencement of the Congress to the partition of Bengal.

5. 1905 – 1919: From the partition and the great swadeshi agitation to the coming of non-cooperation and the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi.

Nabin Kumar, according to Gangopadhyay, is a fictional character but it is quite apparent that he is modeled on Kaliprasanna Sinha, a literary cult figure of nineteenth century Bengal. Kaliprasanna lived a short life during which he achieved a great deal. He translated the Mahabharata into Bengali in eight years, between 1858–1866 and also translated Kalidasa’s Vikromorvasiya. Kaliprasanna founded the Vidyotsahini Sabha just as Nabin
Kumar is shown to be doing in the novel. Nabin Kumar, a child prodigy and star pupil of Hindu college, lives between 1840 and 1870 when he dies prematurely just like Kaliprasanna. This period as shown by Susobhan Sarkar and reiterated by Gangopadhyay, ushered in a new era in the history of Bengal. “There was an awakening in the realms of politics, religion and education such as had never been witnessed before.” But while in Those Days he tries to reconstruct that period he changes the time-frame in the novel.

In the epilogue to Sei Samay he writes. “My personal view is that the Bengal Renaissance, as we understand it, manifested itself not in the span between 1825 and 1845 as Shibnath Shastri suggests but in the three decades between 1840 and 1870.” Thus Nabin’s life-span is the time-frame of the novel which has in translator Aruna Chakravarti’s words:

A vast canvas against which the lives and destinies of a number of historical figures of the time are traced. Many fictional people and events find their place, too. In fact, one of the unique features of the novel is the deftness with which the author weaves the actual and the purely fictional into the tapestry of his story. Another is the quality of his voice – rational, analytical and totally without bias.
Those Days is the story of the rise and the fall of an established, rich land owning middle class Bengali Bhadralok family. Through a focus on education and culture this story is intertwined with important events in the history of a new Bengal. Many illustrious and famous personalities enter and exit through the pages of the novel making it a rich and colorful canvas. It is noteworthy that almost all the historical personalities brought to life in the novel, including the fictional Nabin Kumar, are men of letters. If Nabin Kumar symbolized the birth of a new era then it was to be powered by education and literature. From the Derozions, the Tagores, Kesab Sen, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, David Hare, John Bethune, Harish Mukherjee, Ramtanu Lahiri, Pyarichand Mitra, Dinabandhu Mitra to several others, all become part of both the colonial and the anti-colonial project.

Some important details about Nabin’s birth cannot be overlooked. He is a premature baby. “The child was born seven months and ten days after conception. Stifling in the secret recess of his mother’s womb, the little mass forged ahead, before his time, from darkness to light.” (Those Days 1) Was the nineteenth century renaissance before its time? Gangopadhyay joins other voices in questioning the composition and impact of this renaissance. In the epilogue to Sei Samay he asks whether it was widespread or restricted to just an elite section of society. Apparently, in setting the novel among the upper middle class, Gangopadhyay has concurred with the view that the renaissance
was limited in nature. That it was aided by the influx of westernization is implied by the fact that Nabin’s birth was assisted by three English doctors, of course along with traditional Indian medicine. “Three English doctors sat with grim faces on the velvet couch to her right. On her left, the famous Kaviraj Deen Dayal Bhesak Shastri stood, eyes closed, chin sunk into his breast.”

(TD 3)

Nabin’s mother almost dies while giving birth but recovers miraculously as does her premature baby. Both the old and the new survive together with the help of western science and medicine. Nabin’s birth is shrouded in mystery. He is actually the biological son of Bidhubhusan Mukherjee, his father’s closest friend. The illegitimacy of his birth highlights the illegitimacy of modernity under colonialism. A modernity that is superimposed and does not include all sections of society cannot be sustained. The brief and eventful life of Nabin is symbolic of the blazing but limited impact of the Bengal Renaissance. In an interview to Subhajit Bhadra, Gangopadhyay says:

Through this novel, I actually wanted to question the authenticity of the Bengal Renaissance and Bengal’s consistent claim for such an achievement. Through my engagement with books and archival materials, I could realize that Bengal Renaissance was not a comprehensive achievement like the Italian Renaissance. Bengal Renaissance saw some
developments in literature and religion only. There was not any achievement in art and music during Bengal Renaissance. Bengal did not have any classical music or dance forms like Assam and Orissa. But there was an attempt to achieve religious reform by the Brahmos that initially appeared to be a welcome movement. But it was confined only within the upper class people and failed miserably to bring the Hindus to a common platform. A person belonging to servant class or a prostitute’s son could never become a Brahm. Unlike Christianity or Islam it was not accommodating enough. Thus, ultimately it dies down. 

Both Those Days and First Light are mega-narratives and both enrich each other. While both are linked by themes and characters, Sunil Gangopadhyay emphatically states that “First light is not another volume of Those Days. It is a sequel in time.” (FL VIII) Between Those Days and First Light, Gangopadhyay wrote and published another epic novel, Purba Pashchim. Though separated by fourteen years, First Light carries forward the story of the Bengal Renaissance to culminate in the resurgence of nationalism. In fact the idea of a ‘nation’ that emerged in Bankimchandra’s works is carried forward further through the plot and the historical figures who dot the novel. First Light documents the impact of western science and rationalism on Indian society and at the same time the contribution of Dr. Mahendralal
Sarkar and Jagadish Chandra Bose and the impact of revivalists like Shri Ramkrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda. Both *Those Days* and *First Light* dwell on the rise of the Bengali middle class but in *First Light* we see how the revolutionizing of life and values under western rule led to a resentment of foreign rule. The protagonists of both *Those Days* and *First Light* are writers and men of letters with the spotlight on Tagore, the complete Renaissance man.

In *First Light* the subaltern flirts with the elite. The cream of Bengali society on one hand and the bastard prince Bharat and bondmaid Bhumisuta rub shoulders. From centre to periphery all are conjoined by the emerging nation with Rabindranath becoming the nodal point in Sunil Gangopadhyay’s multidirectional and polyphonic novel. In *Those Days* the final words of Nabin herald the coming of Rabindranath and his vision of the nation. “What we need is an amalgam of races, religions, knowledge and cultures. If they stand apart from one another they will avail us nothing….” (*TD* 588)

If the events of *Those Days* took place between 1840 and 1870 then *First Light* is situated between 1880 and 1910. Historical continuity is maintained and connections between old characters and new entrants are forged. The Tagore family dominates the canvas with the focus shifting to the creative genius of Rabindranath. In Tagore’s journey from literary artist to nationalist, Gangopadhyay merges the life and times of many greats from Indian history. All the learned and talented members of the Tagore household
from Maharishi Debendranath and his sons, daughters, grandchildren play a
major role in the novel, with their interactions inside and outside the family
unit moving the plot forward.

The arts, especially the flowering of the theatre, with Girish Ghosh and
Binodini leading from the front provides a platform for expressing and
exploring the life, hopes and aspirations of the underclass of society which
masked their marginalization by the glitter of the stage. Rani Rasmoni’s
legacy is carried forward by Shri Ramkrishna and his foremost disciple,
Vivekananda who blazes like a meteor across the world. Shri Aurobindo,
Tilak and Gandhi complete the triad formed by the arts, religion and politics.

If Those Days centered around Calcutta, Bengal with a few forays
upcountry, especially to Benares then First Light spans India, Europe and
America. In keeping with Rabindranath’s relationship with Tripura, the novel
begins with a lyrical description of Tripura. Maharaja Birchandra Manikya
was the proud ruler of “the only independent kingdom in a country governed
by the British.” (FL 4) In fact a significant part of the novel is devoted to
Tripura and to Bharat, the king’s illegitimate son. Bharat’s journey begins
from Tripura but carries him through the turbulent period of Indian
nationalism. That an illegitimate child, from a remote kingdom should play
centre-stage and occupy as pivotal a role as Rabindranath in the novel was not
what the author had initially planned. “When I first brought the king’s bastard
Bharat into the narrative I didn’t dream that he would come to dominate the entire novel in the way he has done. I had thought to make Rabindranath the hero….” (FL X)

In fact in First Light real and imagined characters meld into the fictional canvas and it is difficult to distinguish between them. Bharat, the bondmaid Bhumisuta, Basantamanjari the prostitute, Dwarika, Jadugopal and Ifran are the unsung subalterns who cross paths with the elite, the famous, the artists, revolutionaries and the makers of history, gently reminding us that all must journey together in the ‘nation,’ that the makers and shapers of history cannot do without foot soldiers.

In order to infuse the novel with the humanistic principles of both the renaissance and Rabindranath’s world view, Gangopadhayay privileges the love story of Bharat and Bhumisuta. It is the common thread from beginning to end that binds the novel. If the novel begins with the lyrical description of the beauty of nature, then it concludes with Rabindranath’s poem:

You and I have floated here on the stream that brings from the fount
At the heart of time love of one for another.
We have played alongside millions of lovers, shared in the same
Shy sweetness of meeting, the same distressful tears of
farewell -

old love, but in shapes that renew and renew forever. *(FL 753)*

It is only love and humanity that can defeat time and bring people together.

Through historical fiction we get to fulfill our curiosity about great men and women. But historical romances such as Bankinchnandra’s *Durgeshnandini*, or Scott’s *Ivanhoe* give us a one dimensional perspective and keeps us at a distance from the protagonists. Actually historical fiction enables us to see the past through the lens of the present. Gangopadhyay elaborates his use of history and this genre:

I always chose historical characters, who brought significant changes. The canvas of *Prathom Alo* was much larger than anything else…. I have tried to balance between fact and fiction. In 1905, when Bengal was partitioned for the first time … it was reunited. But when it was partitioned in 1947, it was different. I have feelings and memories of that period and I knew it would be never reunited again. I wanted to depict a time in this novel when Bengalis through their courage and integrity forced the Britishers to change their decision. I again blended fact and fiction. While writing about history, you cannot deviate from accuracy. But I was not interested in writing history, I was indeed writing a novel and so I created
fictional characters that granted me liberty. I cannot afford to change the lives of Ramkrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda or Rabindranath Tagore. So I adopted the persona of Bharat that helped me to do that balancing. 

Sumita Chakravarty in her essay, *Sei Samay: Satyer Galpo, Galper Satya*, quotes Mahasweta Devi as saying that she would have liked to write about such a youth “who would through his birth and life struggle to create a new world of his own making.” If this is true of Nabin in *Those Days* it is more so with Bharat in *First Light*. For those who felt that Gangopadhyay had deviated from his Marxist moorings and the examination of a society plagued by poverty, unemployment and violence to write the period novel *Sei Samay*, then we see a return of the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity in *First Light*. Freedom and a new life is only for Bharat and Bhumisuta, the once wretched of the earth. The former prince and bondmaid suffer life’s indignities without compromising their integrity. Throughout their travails it is their humanism, their engagement with life and people of all strata of society that infuses their life with a quiet dignity. They live history and are responsible for their own salvation. The illegitimate, Kachhua’s child is recognized as an heir.

‘You are my brother- a prince of the royal dynasty of Tripura. You’ve been denied your lawful rights all these years. But no more of that. You shall have your title, your own rooms in the
royal palace and a monthly allowance of three hundred rupees. You must go back to Tripura. Promise me you will.’ Looking on that dying face Bharat could not refuse. He nodded in obedience to his ruler’s command but in his heart he knew he would never go back to Tripura or claim his inheritance. (FL 750)

He may have been a Kachhua’s son, an illegitimate son of the king and banished from royal society but he had a thirst for learning. When we meet him early in the novel he could recite Bankimchandra’s Chandrashekhar word for word. “From what hidden source did this orphan boy, living on the king’s charity in the servant’s wing, derive his scholarly bent of mind, his passionate zeal for the written word? Was it the dark, suffocating aridity of his life that had impelled him to seek light and freedom in the pages of a book?” (FL 20)

Bharat does seek light and freedom, but not in the pages of a book. It is in Bharat darshan, travelling throughout India, meeting and living with the highest and lowest, in palaces and on river banks that he discovers himself and his country. He lives in the present, reclaims his past by giving up his inheritance and rushes to Dasashwamedh ghat to catch Bhumisuta. In Kashi, he is born again. On the ashes of his past he stakes a claim to the future. Ironically it is in Kashi, the final destination for Indian widows, that Bhumisuta finds her lost love and is reunited with Bharat.
The union of Bharat and Bhumisuta can be read allegorically as the nation united with its feminine principle. Symbolizing the eternal spirit of India, the resilient and indestructible, it is united with the pure and unsullied, “…. frozen in time, as though they had been together from the beginning of life itself and would be together for aeons and aeons to come.” (*FL 753*)

In *Those Days* and *First Light* we see the middle and upper class Bengali and Hindu society leading the march of history although it is the orphaned and dispossessed who become the inheritors of the future. The novels span a period from 1840 to 1910. In contrast Ahmed Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi* spans a period of just ten years from 1910 to 1919 and captures the claustrophobic and self destructive inwardness of a particular class within the Indian Muslim community.

By stoking cultural memory while harking back to 1857 Ali portrays the persecution of Muslims by the British colonial power for their role in the mutiny to overthrow the British Raj. From 1857 onwards Muslims were victimized, tortured and killed. Racial memory comes together with personal history. He says that,

The story of my immediate ancestors held the key to a treasure trove of mysteries. My grandmother was five and my grandfather eleven when the ghadar of 1857, the blind persecution and massacre of the citizens of ‘Delhi’ took place.
The triumphant British held an orgy of blood and terror, all mention of which has been dropped by their historians.

As though this had not been enough to quench the bloody thirst of the conquistadores, the whole Muslim population of Delhi was banished for five years, their homes dug up by the prize agency for buried treasures, the women molested and searched for ornaments and gold by Red faced Tommies. Suffering hardship of every kind, wandering from jungle to jungle, village to village, in search of food and shelter, they trudged back from exile to find that they had neither roof nor walls nor doors to protect them from wind and weather and they had to restart life as paupers and a vanquished people, like the Aztecs and Incas of Mexico and Peru were three hundred years before them. (TID XVI)

Ali draws parallels with the colonization of the Americas and like all colonization by the white race it is accompanied by brutal violence and a desire to dominate populations and local culture. Ali believes that “The damage done by colonial powers to the heritage of conquered peoples are irreversible, yet racial memory is a collective store house that time and history cannot eradicate.” (TID XI) In the novel he attacks the civilizing mission of colonialism and through it responds to the deliberate and false propaganda against Indians, especially Muslims, that they were backward, uncivilized and
inferior. The novel is an attempt to retrieve the past that colonial history has tried to erase and try to restore to India and Indian Muslims a sense of identity lost in the turbulence of colonialism.

The night is dark, the waves rise mountain high,
And such a storm is raging! (TID 5)

Part I begins with these lines from Hafiz indicating the turmoil within a besieged city and its people and pointing towards the impending upheaval, caused by the growing national movement. Though the story is located in Delhi, the author’s childhood is representative of the plight of India. He mourns its lost glory:

But the city of Delhi, built hundreds and hundreds of years ago, fought for, died for, coveted and desired, built, destroyed and rebuilt, for five and six and seven times, mourned and sung, raped and conquered, yet whole and alive, lies indifferent in the arms of sleep. It was the city of kings and monarchs, of poets and story tellers, courtiers and nobles. But no king lives there today, and the poets are feeling the lack of patronage, and the old inhabitants, though still alive, have lost their pride and grandeur under a foreign yoke. Yet the city stands still intact as do many more forts and tombs and monuments, remnants and reminders of old Delhi’s, holding on to life with a tenacity and purpose which is beyond comprehension and belief. (TID 8)
As mentioned earlier the novel spans the period from 1910 to 1919, and covers significant moments in Indian history, especially the national movement. It is divided into four parts roughly coinciding with three major historical events, The mutiny of 1857, the Delhi Durbar of 1911 and the passing of the Rowlatt Act in 1919. The first part talks of the rape of Delhi and the chief protagonist Mir Nihal mourns the plight of the city under the British. He symbolizes the last vestiges of a vanishing feudal order. His pigeon flying days and five year liaison with his mistress Babban Jan are numbered though he is as yet unaware of the tragedy that awaits him. So strong is his antipathy towards the British that he forbids his son Asghar from going to Aligarh for further studies. Even though it is a Muslim Institution he believes “that it is all the evil-doing of the farangis who want to make Christians and atheists of all of us.” (TID 62)

As a member of the feudal class he takes pride in his class position and refuses Asghar’s alliance with Mirza Shahbaz Beg’s family for two reasons. One, he and his wife are against a love match and second that of miscegenation. Begum Nihal declares; “It has been the custom from the time of our elders that the girl the parents have selected for the boys has been accepted by them.” (TID 68) But her daughter convinces her to speak to Mir Nihal for permission to bring Bilqeece into the family. But Mir Nihal will have none of it. “How can my son marry Mirza Shahbaz Beg’s daughter? You
don’t want to bring a low-born into the family? There are such things as the family honor and name. I won’t have the marriage.” (*TID* 81)

The first part is filled with quotidian details of the domestic life of Mir Nihal. While lamenting the decline of Delhi, Mir Nihal goes about the business of living. His daily routine and the lifestyle at home is the same as his forebears but modernity slowly makes its presence felt through Asghar and his shoes and clothes, and his desire to choose a bride for himself. When that is refused by his father Asghar leaves home. His departure is the beginning of the end. Illicit modernity from the outside world leaves its first mark on the Nihal household. In the novel Mir Nihal, the patriarch of an old Delhi family becomes the symbol of tradition and his young son Asghar the emblem of modernity. That Ali’s sympathies lie entirely with Mir Nihal is evident in the way he strengthens his character and depicts Asghar’s modernity effete.

The second part of the novel deals with the Delhi Durbar of 1911. While Delhi is readied for the coronation of George V as Emperor of India, tragedy strikes Mir Nihal’s family. As the British ready themselves for further glory, Mir Nihal’s world slowly falls apart. His mistress Babban Jan is seriously ill and dies even before he can reach her to bid a final goodbye. He loses his pigeons first to the heat and then to the cat. But the loss of his pigeons is his own fault. He had left the door of the loft open. The outside world will always impinge on the inner no matter what. No one is immune
and time marches on. Mir Nihal slowly withdrew from life. First he gave up going to his shop after Babban Jan’s death. “But something within him had died; and he did not go to the shop. She for whom he had worked was there no more…. Now she was dead; and he did not care. What mattered it, if he was dependent on his sons or anybody else? And he decided to give up his work…..” (TID 133)

Thus begins the decline of the once masterful head of the Nihal family. He consents to Asghar’s marriage to Bilqeece. The marriage, Eed and the coronation come together. The marriage had to be postponed to December on account of the coronation. Ironically his sons are involved in the preparation for the coronation and Ali shows how it took precedence over family:

As Shah Maqbul arrived, they all began to look forward to Eed, which was not far away, nor was Asghar’s marriage. It had originally been fixed for the month of Eed, but had to be postponed till December as Mir Nihal’s elder sons could not get long leave. They were busy making preparation for the coronation of George V which was to take place in December; and they had to send things and men for the event from their various districts to Delhi. (TID 151)
Once again foreign rule impacts Mir Nihal’s life, although indirectly, through his sons. The city of Delhi undergoes a transformation in readiness for the coronation. The residents of the old city “were agog and stared in wonder at this bustle, many happy in the hope of gain, others raging within their hearts at the thought of subjection to a foreign race….” (TID 157) The kababi, the bania, the carpenter, the middleman and suppliers like Mir Nihal’s son were those who welcomed the changes because it brought them new found prosperity. Mirza the milk seller, whose nationalist son will be later killed while taking part in an anti-government procession, is the only dissenting voice in his group. Through the exchange between Mirza and Siddiq, Ahmed Ali presents the different views:

You should thank the Aangrezi Sarkar for this’ said Siddiq, the bania. ‘For it is through it that we are getting all this.’

What had the Angrezi Sarkar to do with this?’ Said Mirza, the milk seller, who sat with his legs arched up in front of him.’

God alone gives us our daily bread; and him alone should men thank.

But suppose if the king had not held his Darbar here, what would you have done?’ said Siddiq loudly.’ You couldn’t have forced him to come here, could you? He is a very gracious emperor to think of his subjects and of our Dilli which will now become the capital of India. Soon we shall all be rich and roll in wealth all our lives. (TID 160)
Colonialism and imperialism are closely linked to commerce and capital and both the ruler and ruled are inextricably linked in this collaborative project. At the same time the old guard “who had seen a glimpse of the glamour of the Moghals and had many relations killed during the great destruction and plunder of Delhi in 1857, were stricken, dumb, or cursed the Farangis at home.” (TID 161)

Throughout the novel, the year of 1857 and the city of Delhi act as leitmotifs. Characters and references connected to the year of 1857 make their entries at regular intervals. “One of these was Gul Bano, a grand-daughter of Bahadur Shah” (TID 163) Orphaned during the ‘Mutiny’ she suffered many hardships, married a cook, became widowed and was eventually reduced to begging. Ali evokes both pity and admiration for Gul Bano when he describes her thus:

One day before the coronation of the English king she happened to come to Mir Nihals, for she often came. She was beautiful even in her old age with a broad forehead, fair complexion, and most beautiful eyes. She never begged directly but sang Bahadur Shah’s poems which he had written in his banishment and which had been banned. (TID 163)
Even though the city takes on a festive hue, with building and construction activity everywhere Gul Bano laments:

Delhi was once a Paradise,
And great were joys that used to be here.
But they have ravished this bride of peace,
And now remains only ruins and care. (TID 165)

Mir Nihal chooses to walk away from the coronation and his state of mind echoes that of Mirza Nazirul Mulk, the youngest son of Bahadur Shah, now a beggar, “No, brother these things are not for us now.” (TID 177) Mir Nihal retreats into his world of the past.

Section three of Twilight In Delhi takes up the period from 1912 to 1917, an important time in the nation’s life as well as in world history. Nationalism in Europe turns bloody with the outbreak of the First World War. In India the national movement gains momentum and terrorist and seditious activities increase. Young revolutionaries in Bengal attempt to topple British rule with violence. However, Mir Nihal’s family is insulated from all this. Asghar’s marriage is celebrated, so is Mehro’s. The family reunion keeps the world outside in abeyance. But Asghar’s dream of a happy marriage turns sour, perhaps mirroring the approaching turbulence both in the home and outside. The Farangi’s world has crept indoors. Bilqeece’s English shoes, Asghar’s job in a big Indian firm, his separate home fitted with English furniture, his dressing gown are all signs of the new fangled modernity that Mir Nihal hated. His views
uttered by Saeed Hassan intrude upon Asghar, “Our people used to sit on the floor, it could be used to sleep on and other purposes. But we are forgetting our own culture and learning the ways of others.” (TID 226)

The conflict between old and new takes on an Indian versus British connotation and by 1913 “the terrorist movement was gaining ground all over the country. Already dissatisfaction with the foreign yoke has spread.” (TID 229) The people resented the changes wrought in their beloved city of Delhi. Seven Delhis had fallen and “now the eighth was under construction and the people predicted that the fall of its builders would follow soon. It’s foundations had at-least been laid. From that eventful year, 1911, which marked, in a way, the height of British spender in India, its downfall began.” (TID 230) So also the decline in Mir Nihal’s health. Just as the British rule in Delhi would not last more than a few decades from 1911 so too would Mir Nihal not outlive the British. He suffered a stroke and then onwards his days on earth would be numbered. It was as if he knew that he could never reclaim Delhi and therefore had given up the fight.

The final part of the novel details the mounting agitation against the Rowlatt Act, the firing against innocent people and the influenza epidemic that breaks out in Delhi in the summer of 1918. Throughout the novel Mir Nihal puts up a rearguard fight against western modernity. For him preservation of his culture and past is all important. I believe that Ahmed Ali also concurs with Mir
Nihal’s views because all forms of modernity are displaced. Asghar has to leave home. He loses his wife and his love. Habibullah the elder son dies and Mirza, the milk seller’s nationalist son is shot dead by the government. Only Mir Nihal lives on presiding over a life “over which men had no command and must go on.” *(TID 318)* “He lay on the bed in a state of coma, too feeling-less to sit up or think.” *(TID 318)* He would remain untouched by the changes around him just as he had all along. He was both at home and in exile at the same time.

It is interesting to study how both Sunil Gangopadhyay and Ahmed Ali depict Indian society at critical junctures in its history. All the incidents in the narrative are carefully located in time and they show tremendous skill and knowledge of human psychology in the delineation of their protagonists. They are aware of the social and cultural movements of the time in which they locate their stories and history and memory come together very effectively in their novels. While Ahmed Ali represents the British empire and the Raj as a corrosive power, Sunil Gangopadhyay’s novels seem to emphasize its productive cultural influence. If *Twilight in Delhi* is a turning inwards, retreating from the west in order to preserve identity then in *Those Days* and *First Light* we see collaboration with the west and the formation of a new identity. If in *Twilight in Delhi* we see an eschewing of non-oriental cultural influences then in Gangopadhyay’s novels there is a coming together of the orient with the empire. All three novels are involved in a complex transaction of both anglicist and oriental priorities.
Section II - Voices from the colonial space

The Bengal Renaissance played a transformative role in Indian life and not only triggered a flowering in humanities, science, religion and social reform but was also a platform for exploring the question of the formation of identities. Sunil Gangopadhyay’s novels Sai Samay (Those days) and Pratham Alo (First Light) cover the period from 1840 right up to 1910, a period that covers the renaissance up to the rising tide of nationalist consciousness. The novels are peopled with well known historical figures who find themselves caught up in a society that is in transition. Moving back into the past the writer, through his protagonists depicts the creation as well as unraveling of identities. What we see is the colonized subject groping towards a modern and even secular identity as in the case of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Michael Madhusudan Dutt and someone like Swami Vivekananda who spoke from a religious space. The reason for selecting them as central figures in this study is because they represent the core areas of the Bengal Renaissance: literature, education, social reform and religion.

The choice of the Bengal Renaissance as backdrop for the novel is instrumental in viewing culture as a site for struggle, for resistance and
representation because as K. N. Panikkar points out, “culture is not static but dynamic in its character and practice.” 9 The close encounter of the two civilizations, the European and the Indian, resulted in “two mutually historical experiences – colonial rule and contact with a totally different culture.” 10

The three protagonists were pioneers in the creation of a modern Indian culture which though not immediately apparent was a move towards democratization of social and political power. The first step in this process was to rejuvenate the culture from within, by a radical overhaul of contemporary literary, social and religious mores. Their personal journey and the trials and tribulations as they went about their tasks is recounted by Gangopadhyay in Those Days and First Light. The three, Vidyasagar (1820 – 91), Madhusudan Dutt (1824 – 73) and Swami Vivekananda (1862 – 1902) differed from each other by virtue of their backgrounds, caste and temperament but as residents of the urbs prima of Imperial India they were able to see and visualize first hand the impact and changes wrought by colonialism on society as well as the psyche of the colonized. Their story is the enactment of their participation as well as resistance to the psychological structures and cultural forces unleashed by colonialism. In the words of Ashis Nandy “The colonized Indians did not always try to correct or extend the orientalists; in their own different way, they tried to create an alternative language of discourse. This was their anti-colonialism.” 11
Pundit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar rose from grinding poverty to become a towering personality in the history of Bengal and India. He lived by his own dictum of hard work and learning to move from head punditship of Fort William College to the Principalship of Sanskrit College in 1851. A Sanskrit scholar, writer, farsighted educationist and social reformer he was rooted in Indian ways, customs and traditions but his rationalism prevented him from being blinded by superstition and outdated customs. Vidyasagar and his father Thakurdas Bandopadhyay were first generation migrants to Calcutta from their village Birsingha in Midnapore district. Life in the city was one of genteel poverty.

Thakurdas Babu earned ten rupees a month, on which he fed and educated three sons, five nephews and all of his kith and kin who came up from the village to seek employment in the city. All the boys were studious and painstaking. His eldest, Ishwar, was a renowned student of Sanskrit college and received a stipend of eight rupees each month, which he handed over to his father. (TD 49)

But Vidyasagar had a hunger for learning. Born a pundit’s son, he had mastered Sanskrit and was an “outstanding scholar and versifier.” (TD 49)

Working at Fort William, teaching the British Sanskrit and Bengali, he quickly imbibed some of their traits.
Just as the British knew that to rule India they had to understand her first and to do so they would have to learn her languages, so Ishwar knew that to understand the British and their ideas of governance, he would have to learn their language. Now he studied English and Hindi in the mornings before leaving for Fort William and on his return, cooked evening meal, helped his brothers with their homework and then after everyone was asleep, lit the lamp and read and wrote for into the night. (*TD* 49)

He grasped quite early that English education was necessary for employment especially for the middle and lower middle classes who hardly had any land to fall back on. So naturally he focused on education especially the kind that would benefit the masses. In fact all the writings on education and gender equality were part of his transformative social program. As principal of Sanskrit college Vidyasagar put forward his educationalist philosophy. He suggested a modern, rational course of learning where Sanskrit would be taught but with Bengali and English alongside. The schools of philosophy that debarred widow remarriage or were tilted against other doctrines were to be replaced by the study of *Sarvadarshanasangraha* or a compilation of philosophical treatises to enable students to pit ideas against each other and come to their own conclusions. His next major educational reform was his championing of Bengali as a suitable medium of learning. For this however a new modern Bengali prose, different from the ‘jaw breaking’ and ‘unreadable’
(TD 52) prose had to be created and Vidyasagar took it upon himself to do so. He decided to graft into Bengali, English punctuations and a more robust, colloquial style. This exchange between Vidyasagar and his close friend Madanmohan Tarkalankar is illustrative of his unprecedented move and the equally incredulous response that he met with from Bengali society.

In response to Madanmohan’s description of Bengali prose as jaw-breaking, Vidyasagar responds:

‘I agree with you. The texts I teach in Fort William are unreadable. And that is precisely the reason I’ve taken to it. I want to strip the language of its trappings and mould it anew.’

‘You’re wasting your time. No one will read Bengali prose.’

‘Even if the language is simple and easily comprehended?’

‘Even so. The literary among us will not abandon Sanskrit and the pragmatic will turn to English. There is no place for Bengali –’

‘My idea was to create a language for the masses.’

‘Well get on with it. Let’s hear what you have written.’..

‘Go slow,’ Madan interrupted ‘What do you think you are doing? Driving a phaeton?’
‘No Madan, I’m reading the way Bengali prose is read. The English use commas, full stops, question and exclamation marks. That’s how their prose becomes living and dynamic. Poetry can get along without these for it has a rhythm and cadence of its own. But not prose. I’ve decided to introduce punctuation marks in Bengali.’

‘You have sold yourself, body and soul, to the British and are eternally singing their praises. But how could you imagine that punctuation marks could be grafted on our language?’

‘Why not? They lend the language lucidity and precision. Just listen to this.

‘In the meantime, Balaram and the gopis went to Jashoda and said, ‘O go! Krishna has stuffed a ball of clay in his mouth. We keep telling him to take it out but he won’t.’ The loving mother Jashoda, ran to her son and tweaking his cheek, said angrily, ‘you’ve been eating clay again, you naughty boy! Come home this instant and see what I do to you’.

‘Stop! Stop!’ Madan cried out in alarm, ‘Do you call this prose? This is language of peasants, most common and vulgar. Who will want to read such stuff?’ (TD 52 – 53)
It was necessary to make Bengali prose simpler, direct, more colloquial to enable it to become a suitable medium of instruction. To introduce mass education in the vernacular it was imperative that Bengali should become a suitable vehicle. By promoting vernacular education, Vidyasagar was working towards the democratization of education by broadening the social base and moving education away from its pre-colonial Brahminical culture. What must be noted was that it was not anglicized education but the vernacular that he was propagating. He took on Bethun’s mantle:

Bethune Saheb had been dead these many years but his spirit lived on in the diminutive Brahmin, whose dhoti wouldn’t fall below his knees and whose coarse uduni barely covered his chest. Bethune had declared that true knowledge could only be imparted through the mother tongue. Vidyasagar had taken this advice to heart. He believed that though the study of Sanskrit served very well for those who wished to pursue a scholastic career, the average Bengali child should be instructed through the vernacular. It was important to open schools, thousands of them, not only in towns and cities but in villages and suburbs.

*(TD 261)*

Not content with introducing Bengali into the curriculum Vidyasagar wanted to introduce the study of science and geography as well but found that the teachers were quite out of their depth. On his tours to the village schools he came across teachers and students who were ignorant of the new sciences.
Addressing pupils, he would ask the question, “Can you tell me how day and night are born?” *(TD 263)* When instead of the students, the teacher, the pundit moshai answered, “why day breaks when the Sun god takes his seat in the seven horse chariot. And it comes to an end when he has concluded his journey over the sky from east to west.” *(TD 263)* Vidyasagar would reply, “That is a myth from the Puranas’ … ‘Haven’t you heard of rotation and revolution? The pundit shook his head. ‘The sun does not move, Vidyasagar continued, ‘It is fixed in the sky. The earth moves around the Sun.’” *(TD 263)*

On his tours “Vidyasagar discovered a profound truth. It was not enough to open schools for the education of children. Teachers had to be educated first. He had to open a normal school, which would turn out men capable of imparting instruction.” *(TD 264)*

His views on education were well thought out and when implemented would not only ensure better quality of education but also make it accessible to all sections of society. As Assistant Inspector of schools for the four districts he had established twenty model schools as well as a school to train village headmasters at the Sanskrit college.

Vidyasagar also remained committed to women’s education and in his official position established forty girls’ schools in villages in a period of seven months from November 1857 to June 1858. Throughout, Vidyasagar’s focus was to expand the educational base across Bengal and not limit it to Calcutta.
Vidyasagar was a man of tremendous energy and will power. “Walking did not tire him. Meals posed no problem. A handful of rice and lentils, which he boiled himself over a couple of faggots, was enough for him. For sleep he sought out the shade of a tree. The fierce rays of the sun, the pounding rain – nothing had the power to deter him.” (TD 262) He set himself several tasks at once. Setting up schools, writing primers and text books went hand in hand with his passionate concern for women. Seething with anger at the practice of child marriage, austere widowhood and polygamy Vidyasagar embarked on one more momentous task that would shake the foundations of orthodox Hindu society. In this he was supported by his parents.

‘Ishwar’ his father turned to him. ‘You’ve studied the shastras very carefully. Do they all enjoin us to treat our widows so harshly? Can’t widows be given better lives?’

‘Of course. They can’ Ishwar replied, his face red with suppressed agitation. ‘They can even remarry.’

‘Remarry! What are you saying?’

‘There are three options which widows may choose from. They may burn with their husbands, live lives of abstinence and piety; or remarry as they will.’

‘Can you prove it?’

Ishwar’s eyes blazed. He looked straight into his father’s eyes and said, ‘You know that once I set my mind to a task I don’t leave off until it is accomplished. I’ll wring the shastras dry till
I come upon the proof. I’ve wanted to do it for sometime now.

If you give me your blessings –

‘Why not? Why should I withhold my blessings?’ (TD 265)

Vidyasagar then set out to buttress his arguments in favor of widow remarriage. He did this not by borrowing western models but on indigenous terms. In his first essay on social reform, “Balyabibaher Dosh” (Evils of child-marriage, 1850) Vidyasagar critiqued the existing marital practices and the enforcement of austere widowhood, often on child widows. He lashed out against polygamy, unequal marriages and the pitiable condition of women. All his arguments were based on shastras and custom.

“Ishwar Chandra’s book, A Discourse on the Necessity of Introducing Widow Remarriage in Society, let loose a storm of controversy. Scores of pundits took up their pens in protest but Ishwar Chandra was ready with his counter-arguments and were amply supported with quotations from ancient texts.” (TD 333) What Vidyasagar set out to do was to reverse the law that prohibited widow remarriage. Since personal and family matters were regulated in accordance to Hindu shastras and the Muslim shariat, Vidyasagar had to find evidence in the shastras to justify widow remarriage. This he did. Simultaneously he reached out to the general public and published his views supported by translated versions of shastric passages. This was an attempt to throw open the debate from narrow confines of the pundits into public space through the very use of the vernacular that he had earlier championed.
Vidyasagar, in 1855, was creating an alternative space, a public forum for debate and discussion and reaching out to those hitherto kept away from contributing and participating in law enactment. Vidyasagar also interacted with leading pundits, big zaminders and caste-sabhas and even approached his leading opponent, Radhakanta Deb through his grandson.

Radhakant Deb’s grandson Ananda Charan Basu, was a friend of Vidyasagar and had tutored him in Shakespeare at one time. Vidyasagar sought his help, saying, ‘Your grandfather is one of the most respected men of the city. He can change destinies of our widows if he so wishes. Why don’t you talk to him and get him on our side?’ (TD 335)

Vidyasagar also went about collecting signatures from many eminent men. Thus he was not only aware of the different constituencies involved but successfully utilized and manipulated, for purposes of reform, the existing traditions and social networks of nineteenth century India while at the same time broadening the base for democratization.

In Ashis Nandy’s words what Vidyasagar was doing was seeking:

To create a new political awareness which would combine a critical awareness of Hinduism and Colonialism with cultural and individual authenticity….
Ishwar Chandra too fought institutionalized violence against Indian women, giving primacy to social reform over politics. But his diagnosis of Hinduism did not grow out of feelings of cultural inferiority; it grew out of perceived contradictions within Hinduism itself. Even when he fought for India women, he did not operate on the basis of westernized ideals or on the basis of a theory of cultural progress. ¹²

Vidyasagar never abandoned his Indian ways. He maintained the lifestyle of a Brahmin pundit, simple living and high thinking. Sumit Sarkar too, salutes Vidyasagar’s Indianness. “For Vidyasagar’s was never an individualism divested of collective concerns, and he refused to abandon his roots in Brahmanical, and specifically poor Brahmin society, even while seeking to change its norms in specific ways: he soared, we might say, but refused to roam. Therein, up to a point, perhaps lay his strength, and certainly much of his human greatness….” ¹³

When Vidyasagar set out to modernize Bengali and create an enlightened Bengali literature little did anyone envisage the arrival of Michael Madhusudan Dutt on Bengal’s literary scene. Madhusudan was born in 1824 to an affluent family of Calcutta and was a brilliant student of the Hindu college before the fading of the Derozian tradition.

Madhu was only eighteen. Yet his poems were appearing in the

*Bengal Spectator, The Calcutta Literary Gazette, The Comet and*
other English poems and journals. Rajnarayan Dutta’s pride in his son was phenomenal. His colleague in court, Bidhushekhari Mukherjee, once said to him, ‘Your son’s English is so good he’ll be shitting on the heads of the sahibs in a couple of years.’

(\textit{TD} 34)

Rajnarayan and his wife doted on their son and Madhusudan lacked for nothing. His life of luxury, love of poetry and wine led him into dissolute ways. All he could dream was of poetry. “I love poetry, Gour! poetry widens the sphere of our purest and most permanent enjoyments. I’ll be a great poet some day. As great as Byron. You will see! You will write my biography.” (\textit{TD} 32)

Madhusudan Dutt “was an ideologue of the renaissance movement and an avowed modernist. He was a relentless admirer of European modernity, and followed it in every aspect. At the same time, once involved, he was committed to import the best traditions of this modernity into Indian literature. He was convinced about creating a modern identity for the Bengali literature and carve a niche for it in the ‘comity of nations’.\textsuperscript{14} Not just his poetry but Madhusudan’s life and times is part of the modernist project. As a great innovator he infused new life into Bengali literature while formulating an Indian identity that went beyond the Hindu self.
Madhusudan was steeped in classical literature and was among first few Indians to have read in the original, Homer, Virgil, Horace, Dante, Petrarch, Tasso, and Aristo. He thus imbibed the humanist tradition. He had vowed to denationalize himself every step of the way. With his love for English poetry, European dress and food he loved shocking orthodox society. He declared:

‘I am sick of you and your Hindu chauvinism. Beef and wine are the best of foods, meant to build strong people and strong nations! Look at the English, the French, the Russians! They all eat beef and drink wine. That is why they are mighty conquerors. That is why they write the best poetry. And we Hindus! We shave our heads, eat greens and squeal when other nations slap us on the face.’ (*TD* 41)

Madhusudan’s aggressive westernization was sought to be nipped in the bud by his father who had arranged his marriage to “‘a puling infant, seven or eight years old….” (*TD* 36) It is believed that Dutt converted to Christianity just to escape from this marriage and teach his father a lesson. He had earlier threatened, “‘Rajnarayan Dutta dare not insist. If he tries any tricks with me, I’ll punish him so badly, he’ll remember it all his life.’” (*TD* 37)

His conversion to Christianity only strengthened his European connection. In the Derozian mould he adopted extreme Anglicism to denationalize himself and break traditional barriers to modernity. “‘I’m a Christian because I believe in Christianity. And I’ll never reconvert. Never! Not
if the sun starts rising from the west. I consider Hinduism to be a religion of barbarians and I have rejected it once and for all. Now I am a member of the civilized nations of the world. I’m as good as an Englishman.’” *(TD 132)*

Madhusudan became a Christian but couldn’t get accepted as a white man. The racism of the missionaries soon became apparent to him. Expelled from Hindu college, he joined Bishop’s college where he experienced racial discrimination first hand. Faced with social ostracism, racial discrimination, and disinheritance he slipped away to Madras and began his literary career, writing in English. His friend Gour, hoping to secure a recommendation for Madhu presented a copy of his *Captive Lady* to the noted educationist John Eliott Drinkwater Bethune.

Instead Bethune was disappointed with the Indian penchant for using English at the expense of the mother tongue and advised Gour:

‘….I’m of the opinion, sir, that young men of intelligence and education, like your friend, should take up the responsibility of refining the language. If Bengali is, indeed, as crude and shallow as you say, he should seize the opportunity of being the first to give it depth and character. This is a historic moment in your lives, young man. Take it and make the most of it. A fine harvest lies before the man who sows his seed on virgin soil. Why waste your labor on a field already ploughed by many?’ *(TD 213)*
Whether or not Gourdas Basak conveyed Bethune’s sentiments to Madhusudan is not known but he returned by ship to Calcutta quietly one winter morning, on January 1856.

“Among the passengers who stepped out of it was a dark gentleman in a flawless English suit. A large white cylindrical object dangled from his lips. This was the first time that a cigarette was seen in the streets of Calcutta.” (TD 338)

His father had been dead for a year and Gour had summoned him to claim his inheritance which was now possible because of a change of the law. But poor and desperately in need of money he took up a clerk’s post and stayed with Pyarichand Mitra’s brother, Kishori. Here, he was introduced to a new, changed environment, very different from his youthful Hindu college days.

Madhusudan knew many of them already. Ramgopal Ghosh, Dakshinaranjan Mukhopadhyaya, Ramtanu Lahiri and Pyarichand Mitra were his seniors in Hindu College and among the first to adopt western ways, But now, Madhududan saw to his surprise that they had given up their English suits and were dressed like native babus in dhotis, jackets and shawls. And although they spoke excellent English, they were more concerned with the rise and spread of Bengali. (TD 343)

One day he got into an argument with Pyarichand Mitra, the author of Alal’er ghar’ er Dulal, the first Bengali novel. Finding the language
unacceptable Madhusudan burst out, “‘What trash are you writing these days, Pyarichand babu! You are sulllying the exalted realms of literature with language used by servants!’” (TD 343-344) The above dialogue gives us a glimpse of the churning of literary waters and the giant tidal wave in the form of Madhusudan Dutt that was to blow over Bengal. So much so, that in the annals of Bengali literature, he would henceforth be addressed as ‘Mahakavi’ and ‘Adikavi’.

Madhusudan began his Bengali literary career with the resounding success of his play Sharmishtha based on an episode from the Mahabharat. Thereafter, flowed a profusion of plays: Ratnavali, Tilottama Sambhava, Padmavati and finally the crown jewel Meghnad vadh kavya. Ironically, this denationalized Indian, turned poet, found inspiration in the ancient texts and legends of India. As Deenabandhu Mitra declared, “‘Is it not strange that maa saraswati should have chosen to guide the pen of a Christian?’” (TD 475) But Madhusudan was not content with writing prose. Poetry was his first love. “‘I don’t wish to write any more prose. Only poetry! Poetry is the breath of life to me at present. Meghnad shall be the hero of my new poem. I’ll show the world that Ram was a petty trickster and fought an immoral war. I’ll destroy Ram as he destroyed Meghnad.’” (TD 476) In doing so Dutt became a pioneer and as Ashish Nandy describes him, “the person who most dramatically sought to redefine popular mythology to fit the changing values under colonization ……”15


*Meghnadvadh* is a retelling of the Ramayana with Ravana, not Rama as the hero. Ravana and his son Meghnad are depicted as modern, brave heroes who are defeated by the villainous gods, ‘Rama and his rabble.’ Madhusudan Dutt’s Ramayan was a deliberate deviation from that of Valmiki’s. Having lived in Madras he would have perhaps been aware of the South Indian alternative. In fact the war between Rama and Ravana took the form of a political battle, that of Aryans versus non–Aryans. Rama’s troops descending on Lanka resembled the colonizer ravaging Ravan’s island kingdom. Ravan was shown as a modern accomplished warrior, a secular king with a lust for life.

Nirad Choudhari alludes to Dutt’s love of the Greek classics, especially Homer as being responsible for the depiction of Ravan in heroic terms:

He had read Homer and was very fond of him, and it was the Homeric association which was making him represent a war which to us was a struggle between opposites and irreconcilables as a war between rivals and equals….. Ravana was to him another Priam, Ravana’s son a second Hector, and Ravana’s city which to us was the citadel of evil, was to Dutt a second holy Troy.\(^{16}\)

By infusing in Ravana the qualities of the Promethean man, by grafting the Homeric epic onto Bengali literature, by introducing the blank verse and also the sonnet to Bengali poetry he engaged with colonialism, transformed Bengali
literature and in the process, “underwrote the emerging ideology of modernity.”  In picking and choosing and taking only that which was most apt he intervened in structural ways to make Bengali fit and ready for the modern world. From the point of view of the nationalist discourse he was among the elite whom Partha Chatterjee termed the bilingual intelligentsia:

The bilingual intelligentsia came to think of its own language as belonging to that of the inner domain of cultural identity from which the colonial intruder had to be kept out. Language therefore became a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world.  

Vidyasagar functioned within the social domain though with his use of the Hindu shastras he often collided with the religious as well. Madhusudan expressed himself within the cultural domain. “The 19th century Bengal renaissance had three major currents – I) the Rammohan tradition (reformative), ii) the Hindu college tradition (radical) and iii) the Ramkrishna tradition (revivalist).”  If Vidyasagar and Madhusudan Dutt represented the first two then Swami Vivekananda was the exponent of the last, often termed as the revivalist current. Hindu revivalism has been described as a reaction to the west’s sustained attacks on Indian traditions and religious practices. In order to come to terms with a slavish present one had to go back to the golden Vedic
past. While some have seen this as communal and an attempt at Brahmanism it is necessary to briefly study how Swami Vivekananda’s concept of an Indian identity was different from that of a Hindutva one. In several ways Swamiji’s life and mission paralleled that of Vidyasagar and Madhusudan Dutt. He was a modernizer and a man of action. He was a product of Presidency College, had read the western philosophers – Descartes, Hume, Herbert Spencer and was a rationalist. But he was troubled by the inroads the west had made into India. The reform movements had struck at long held beliefs and devout Hindus were confused and on the defensive. Talking to his friend Brajendra Sheel, Naren, the young Vivekananda asks, “Certain religious beliefs and customs have entrenched themselves in our culture for centuries! Can we wipe them out in an instant? And even if we could, would it not create a terrible void? A vast chasm under our feet? With what would we fill it? Tell me Brajen, how would we bear the loss?” (FL 111) Wherever he went and whenever he got an opportunity he asked “‘Have you seen God?’”(FL 111) The only person who answered his question was Shri Ramakrishna and with him he experienced his first epiphanic moment. Ramkrishna, the seer that he was, recognized in the powerful personality of Vivekananda, his humanism and fiery patriotism and declared “‘….You are an ancient Rishi. You are my Narayan in human form.’” (FL 112)

Truly, Vivekananda’s mission was to be in the service of Hinduism and more specifically the ‘Drridra Narayan’. Try as he may Naren could not stay away from Ramkrishna who continued to surprise him with his broad vision and
deep humanism. “Suddenly Naren saw the truth. He had assumed that faith was contradictory to logic. That they were two opposite and one could survive only by denying the other. But Ramkrishna saw faith as empathy in any relationship, human or divine.” (FL 167) After wrestling with rationalism, skepticism and western values, Vivekananda emphatically declared, ‘in other countries,’ he said, “a man may be political first and then he may have a little religion but here in India the first and the foremost duty of our lives is to be spiritual first and then if there is time, let other things come.” 20

The period of Vivekananda’s awakening coincided with rising national consciousness. In 1885 the first session of the Indian National Congress was held in Bombay and in 1893 Vivekanand delivered his famous speech at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. On the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America, a coming together of world religion was planned. Spokespersons from all religions were invited.

The only religion left out was Hinduism. And that was because Americans knew nothing about it. From what they had heard it could hardly be called a religion. It was a savage, primitive cult in which women were burned alive on the funeral pyres of their husband; which encouraged mothers to throw their suckling infants into a so called holy river to be devoured by crocodiles. (FL 412 - 413)
This was the kind of ignorance that Vivekanand had to counter. But his American sojourn, nor the journey there was smooth. It was a journey that transformed Narendranath Dutta to Swami Vivekananda. After Ramkrishna’s death his disciples continued to stay on in the Barahanagar house but it was a purposeless existence. Naren wondered “‘Who am I and what am I doing with my life?’ he asked himself. And, in a moment of clarity, he got the answer. He was not for this world……. The ascetic was like a river which had to flow to keep its waters pure and clear. That day he took a decision. He would leave too. He would explore this country, inch by inch, and see what it was like.” (FL 416-417) It is significant that before his journey abroad Naren undertook to travel the length and breadth of his country to get to know her. At the same time “‘More and more people were talking of the scholarly, handsome sadhu who was steeped in the ancient wisdom of the country yet as enlightened and liberated in thought and spirit as any European.’” (FL 417-418) On his journey he saw first hand the poverty, hunger and sickness of body and soul everywhere. ‘He realized, little by little, that in this country the pursuit of Faith, Knowledge, Reason and Logic had been abandoned ages ago……. ‘Hinduism be damned,’ Naren muttered bitterly when what he saw became unbearable. ‘What is the worth of a religion which draws no one to it? Which rejects its own followers? True morality lies in feeding the hungry, nursing the sick and bringing comfort to the comfortless.’ (FL 418-419)
Sitting on a rock at Kanyakumari, Naren pondered what could India offer to the west? In what way were we equal to them? His was the answer of the colonized Indian. Our inner domain, the spiritual, the core of Indian civilization was intact while the west’s was under stress. He coined the slogan “Give us food and we’ll give you a philosophy.” (FL 419)

This was the message he took to Chicago. The Raja of Khetri and several others funded his trip to Chicago. The Raja also renamed him Vivekananda. So Naren became Swami Vivekananda in 1893, twelve years after he met Ramkrishna Paramhansa. From Chicago his speech resounded across America, to the world he preached India’s spiritual greatness.

‘I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world….. I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We accept all religions as true….. As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to thee…’ (FL 425-426)

He spoke extempore. It was not an academic exercise nor did he try to score points against anyone. “He had spoken from the heart….. He had pleaded for a brotherhood of man.” (FL 426)
According to Ashish Nandy, revivalists like Swami Vivekananda “sought a sense of community as Hindus and a sense of history as community.”\textsuperscript{21} But Sunil Gangopadhyay’s depiction of Swamiji shows him as one not bound by the dogma or traditional Hinduism. He made all out efforts to invigorate Hinduism but by attacking cant, superstition and the caste system. His focus was on man, particularly the poor and a man-making mission was what he envisaged for the Ramkrishna Order. This man-making mission was what influenced modern Indian nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century. Vivekananda’s vision if anything was anti communal. He envisaged a synthesis of Hindu and Islamic values. “Vivekananda hoped for a situation when the reformed Hindu society would be able to unite with the Muslim community in the espousal of a common nationalism in which Vedanta would contribute the ideology and the Islamic society the vigour.”\textsuperscript{22} For him Islam was an integral part of India. “I see in my mind’s eye the future perfect India rising out of the chaos and strife, glorious and invincible, with Vedanta brain and Islamic body.”\textsuperscript{23}

**Section III - Loss, longing and a search for Muslim identity**

In order to understand the crisis of identity among Indian Muslims under British colonial rule we must go back briefly to the nineteenth century when the confrontation between the British and the Muslims of India took place. Beginning with 1757 when Siraj-ud-dula was defeated by Clive and by 1803 when the British arrived in Delhi the Muslim aristocrat, soldier, peasant, weaver
and artisan had begun to feel the adverse impact of British rule on their livelihood, lifestyle and culture. “For the Muslim elite in northern India, British conquest meant the destruction of a way of life more than the destruction of a livelihood.” However, the impact was not uniform and differed according to religion and profession. For example, in Bengal, British rule ruined both the aristocrats in lower Bengal and the Muslim weavers of Dacca but to those engaged in trade and commerce in western India it brought prosperity. Since British intervention slowly changed the nature of employment and livelihood from military to commercial, those who could make the switch would prosper irrespective of religion or caste. By 1803, though the British had occupied Delhi they let the Mughal emperor Shah Alam occupy the throne under the power of the British crown. Till 1857 the British east India company did not anticipate any threat from the rulers of Delhi. By their machinations the British had reduced Bahadur Shah’s income as well as refused to extend the courtesies due to a king. They had even planned to evict the royal family from the Red Fort after Bahadur Shah’s death and allow them to live out the rest of their lives as noblemen. However the uprising of 1857 changed everything and when the British recaptured Delhi in September 1857 most of the family was killed and exiled from Delhi, including the banishment to Rangoon of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last emperor of India.

Even before the Mutiny of 1857, the militant Muslim reform movements of the nineteenth century, especially those of Saiyid Ahmad Bareilly in Punjab
and the North-West, the Faraizis led by Dudu Miyan in Bengal and that of Tutu
Mir also in Bengal had gradually influenced the Indian Muslims to consider
themselves as a political community. The reformist movement had enlisted
peasants, small landholders, teachers, artisans, shopkeepers and even junior
officials, in short, those outside the former ruling circles. The British had had a
glimpse of the militancy of the Muslim poor and lower middle classes and it
was the Muslim sepoys along with their Hindu counterparts who spearheaded
the Mutiny. The troopers of the 3rd Native Cavalry of the British Army were
Muslim and it was they who rode from Meerut to Delhi to install Bahadur Shah
on the throne of Delhi as Emperor of India. However it is a fallacy that only the
Muslims rose against the British. The Hindu sepoys in Barrackpore led by
Mangal Pandey sparked off the revolt and the famous trio of Rani of Jhansi,
Tatya Tope and Nana Phadnavis, were all Hindu. Moreover the Muslims of
Bengal and Punjab did not join the uprising and neither did the Hindus. The
areas where large numbers of Muslims did join battle were in Awadh, Aligarh
region and Rohilkhand.

After the recapture of Delhi by the British, reprisal was ruthless and a
large number of Muslims, both soldier and civilian, including members of the
royal family, were captured, tortured and killed. This brutality is what is most
remembered and reported in the literature of the time and after. Jawaharlal
Nehru himself acknowledged that ‘the heavy hand of the British fell more on
the Muslims than the Hindus.’ The famous poet Ghalib declaimed, ‘Here there
is a vast ocean of blood before me, God alone knows what more I shall have to
behold.’ It is these rivers of blood and other atrocities that Ahmed Ali constantly
refers to in _Twilight in Delhi_. He sees 1857 as the turning point for Indian
Muslims. It was a final attempt to restore lost glory and re-establish their status
as a ruling class. With defeat came loss of power, position and a way of life.
Ahmed Ali laments this loss and makes Delhi the central player, albeit non-
living, in the novel. All action happens in Delhi with memory playing an
important role in nurturing victim hood and a sense of loss. Mir Nihal and his
family constantly hark back to 1857 and the rape and plunder of the city. Mir
Nihal encounters the impoverished kith and kin of Bahadur Shah as they roam
the streets of Delhi. All around him he only sees decay and destruction of an
older, richer culture by an intrusive modernity powered by British rule. Mir
Nihal in some ways reflects the author’s obsession with preserving an authentic
indigenous culture from being polluted by western models. Therefore, though he
abandons Urdu for English while writing the novel, he introduces the vernacular
into the novel by quoting extensively from Urdu and Persian poetry that
flourished in Mughal India. Each chapter begins with an epigraph and within,
the chapters are replete with the poetry of Bahadur Shah, Hafiz, Saadi, Zauq and
others. He identifies art, culture, and literature with Delhi and rues the building
of the new city. Ali bemoans the changes taking place:

Besides, a new Delhi meant new people, new ways, and a new
world altogether. That may be all right for the newcomers, for
the old residents it was a little too much. As it is, strange people had started coming to the city, people from other provinces of India and especially from Punjab. They brought with them new customs and new ways. The old culture which had been preserved within the walls of the ancient town, was in danger of annihilation. Her language on which Delhi had prided herself, would become adulterated and impure, and would lose its beauty and uniqueness of idiom. She would become the city of the dead, inhabited by people who would have no love for her nor any associations with her history and ancient splendor’ (TID 231)

With the impending coronation of George V, Delhi had to be made habitable for the colonial powers. For the Delhi durbar it would have to accommodate hundreds of visitors, Indian princes and rulers, officials and bystanders for which shamanas and pandals were erected:

Near the fort the glacis was leveled into terraces, and the slope leading upwards towards the road was turned into hundreds of stands which encircled the whole of Jama Masjid, and along the Esplanade road. From end to end of the Chandni Chowk divided down the middle by a row of noble and expansive Peepal trees, the central causeway was turned into one long line of wooden stands (TID 158)
And then the British architects, builders and construction workers got down to build a new capital city of India. Under the stewardship of Edwin Lutyens, a New Delhi was being built away from the old walled city. New Delhi, the new imperial capital would outshine the old city of the Mughals. British power, would be made visible through its architecture. The old city was dug up and parts of it demolished, “…its uniqueness and oriental atmosphere were destroyed.” (TID 230)

The conflict was more than just for urban space. The British were taking control of everything and displacing the Muslims, once members of the ruling race.

Mir Nihal often talked of this to his friends and they all felt grieved. But they were masters of their land no longer. They were in the hands of the foreigners who did as they pleased, and they had no command over their destiny. That is why Mir Nihal began to live more and more at home, in his own world, and in the atmosphere of alchemy and medicine, a world which was still his own where no one could disturb him or order him about. (TID 231)

The novel depicts Muslim life in old Delhi in minute detail and portrays different types and classes of people from the landed gentry of Mir Nihal’s family to the barber, flower seller, milk seller, bania, ice-cream sellers, beggars,
qawwals, moazzins, grave diggers and others who comprise the Muslim community of the area. Ali describes their physical attributes, quirks and mannerisms sensitively and we see a bustling, thriving community. The homes and lifestyle, the zenana, the kitchen, the food partaken in the Nihal family are representative of the lifestyle of Muslims of that class. Ali vividly describes the social and religious practices of the community. The celebration of Eid, marriage customs, death rituals, superstitions, and blind faith, alchemy and passion for kite flying and pigeon rearing are indicators of a timelessness and insularity in a community that is walled in and refuses to participate in the activities of a fast changing world. Mir Nihal’s imperviousness to the national movement and rising national consciousness in the India outside the walled city is symptomatic of the self destructive and inward looking attitude of a certain class among Indian Muslims. Only Mirza the milk seller’s son is shown to be participating in the national movement but gets killed in the process.

“Although portrayed critically, Ali’s characters offer a significant corrective to the historical view that the national movement was entirely representative to the needs of India’s communities. In a sense this novel begs its readers to reconsider more objectively, the failure of Indian nationalism to extend its appeal adequately to Muslim inhabitants of the country.”

However what is significant is that no Hindu character is shown in the novel except Dr Mitra, who is called by Asghar, to treat the dying Bilsqueece. The only other Hindus mentioned are the corpses of those who died in the
influenza epidemic. Even Mir Nihal’s memories of the mutiny does not take into account the Hindu participation. The response to the British takeover of Delhi is a Mussalman one. They rally together in defense of their faith.

In front stood Metcalf with his men, and all around lay the corpses of the dead. Already the vultures had settled down to devour the carrion, and the dogs were tearing the flesh of the patriots who lay unburied and un-mourned. As Metcalf saw the people with swords in their hands he opened fire. Hundreds fell down dead on the steps of the mosque and inside, coloring the stones a deeper red with their blood. But with a resolution to embrace death in the cause of the motherland, the Mussalmans made a sudden rally and before Metcalf’s men could fire a second volley of shots, they were at their throats. They began to kill the soldiers who turned their backs and ran for their lives. The Mussalmans chased them at their heels, killing many more until the English had reached the hill. On the hill was more of the English army and a battle ensued. The Mussalmans had no guns and most of them lost their lives…. (TID 173)

It must be noted that the Mussalmans attacked the English soldiers in the name of their motherland. For them “it was better to die like men, fighting for their country and Islam.” (TID 172) Religion and country come together. As Ahmed Ali declared in an interview to Priya Joshi, “it was a book about India, though
written through the eyes of Muslims- of a Muslim family, but it’s the story of India.”

It is more specifically a story of a section of the Muslim community, one that has cut itself away from the larger community of the nation. All major national events leave Mir Nihal, his family and mohalla in Old Delhi untouched. Even the Khilafat movement and the defeat of the English by the Turks at Gallipoli failed to move him. “But, somehow, all this did not affect Mir Nihal. It was not for him the martyrdom and glory in the cause of the motherland. His days had gone, and a new era of hopes and aspirations, which he neither understood nor sympathized with, was beginning to dawn. His world had fallen.” (TID 278) He could mourn the martyrs of 1857 but had no wish to continue their fight in the present. As a product of feudal India, only the past had any meaning for him.

In Mir Nihal’s wish to remain insulated, isolated and away from the mainstream Ali seems to be focusing on issues that concerned the Muslim community before independence and precipitated the partition of India. Writing in the late 1930s, the language issue, the separate electorates, the Muslim league and the demand for Pakistan would have surely exercised Ali. In the eighteen seventies Hindi was adopted as the language of the lower courts in Bihar and then in the central provinces. By 1900 Hindi was permitted in court documents and slowly came to be widely used. This gave Hindus an upper hand in judicial
appointments. By 1911 the number of Hindi newspapers had outstripped the Urdu ones. At the same time the number of English knowing Hindus exceeded that of Muslims in the United Provinces. At the same time in UP the Muslims were losing out in the legal profession, government service and in the local government as well.

The better educated Muslims in Punjab and Bengal and Assam who found themselves in a majority began to ally themselves with the aristocratic leadership of the united provinces and joined hands against cow slaughter, Hindi, worship of the mother goddess, Shivaji and the Hindu intelligentsia and capitalists. The Muslim upper classes were clear that they had a separate identity but needed to assert, define and convert it into a mass movement. By the 1930s Muslims were politically active and had consolidated their constituencies though there was no call for partition as independence itself was not envisaged. Most hoped and believed that Muslims in India would secure equal rights and opportunities and that was the goal of all Muslim politicians. In 1935 Jinnah returned from England and began the transformation of Muslim politics from the provincial to the national level. At the time patriotic Muslims found themselves in a dilemma about their role in nation building. Not wanting to be seen as communal nor sharing Gandhi’s vision of Ram Rajjiya many Muslim intellectuals became socialists or even communists like Ahmed Ali. But we see even Ali breaking away from the all India Progressive Writers Association by the time he wrote *Twilight in Delhi*. His Marxist concerns are
subsumed by the existential angst of the Indian Muslims as symbolized by Mir Nihal. By 1937-1938 the Muslim league had become a force to reckon with. The Congress and the League were the two major parties that would negotiate the future of India with the British. On 23rd March 1940, the All-India Muslim League passed the resolution for ‘Pakistan’ with Jinnah declaring that the Muslims were a nation.

It is against this background that Ahmed wrote and published *Twilight In Delhi*. Did he, like many of the intelligentsia feel that the Muslims had no future in India? That it was their twilight years and that the only way to preserve their culture was to wall themselves in or build walls not bridges between communities. The belief that English and Hindi had replaced Persian, Arabic and Urdu is reflected in the way the youngest son and granddaughter of Bahadur Shah are shown begging while they spout Urdu poetry. Urdu and Urdu speakers had been reduced to poverty and displaced from centre to periphery. It becomes clear that the insularity of Mir Nihal is the fear of loss of identity through its submergence by another. The orphaned children of Bahadur Shah symbolize the isolation and vulnerability of the Indian Muslims. The building of a bigger, newer city by destroying an older thriving one is an attempt at erasing an identity built and cultivated over centuries. Moreover Ali as a writer and academic would have been painfully aware of the creation in Indian literature of the Muslims as the ‘other’. But throughout the novel Ali does not harp on an identity based on religion but on culture, a way of life and uses an
existential framework “to project the loneliness, the sense of alienation, the 
exile being thrust upon the religious ‘other’, the deprivation at both economic 
and political levels, the subordination and marginalization in the cultural 
space.”

Ali is successful in weaving a rich tapestry of Muslim life that cannot 
be divorced from religious and national history. *Twilight In Delhi* is a novel 
where personal history merges with the nation.

Sunil Gangopadhyay makes ‘Time’ the protagonist of *Those Days.* 
Nabin alias Kaliprassanna Singha stands for the new, the modern. The theme of 
India under colonization is taken further in *First Light* where Bharat is the 
spokesman of a new world awakening to freedom. Nabin and Bharat: a new 
India!

In the Mahabharata, ‘Mahakal’ or time is the chief protagonist. So also 
in Gangopadhyay’s ‘epic’ novels, time plays the most crucial role. The colonial 
period was a momentous period in Indian history. It was a period, especially 
1857 onwards, when the idea of India was born.

Cities and townships; suburbs and villages; but no country! The 
land -- from Kabul to Kanyakumari; from Dwarka to Burma -- 
was governed by the British. But whose land was it? To whom 
did it belong?..... There was no concept of country except in 
maps drawn up by the Survey office. Some sought it in the pages 
of the Mahabharat -- others in the annals of Mughal history. For 
some, of course, it lay in the imagination. (*TD* 581)
If ‘Time’ is the hero in Gangopadhyay’s novels, then it rings the death knell in Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi*. Time wreaks havoc on the way of life of Mir Nihal and his family. For Ali the conflict between old and new results in the marginalization of the old order symbolized by Mir Nihal. New strategies have to be devised to cope with change. Engagement with history, not retreating from it will ensure survival and eventual success. Gangopadhyay’s protagonists take up the challenges posed by westernization. They struggle to define themselves vis–a-vis colonialism and construct a new identity for themselves in the process. In *Twilight in Delhi* we see the feudal elite trying to cling on to a dying world. It is both unable to and unwilling to accept the present. Living in the past it fails to define a future for itself. That future, in the twentieth century, would be a new era, one that would decisively push out the old and ring in the new. History would be made by men and women who would step out of the shadows of a feudal world into a more democratic one.

Notes


5. Aruna Chakravarti. Introduction, _Those Days_, VIII.


12. ibid 27.


23. ibid 212.

