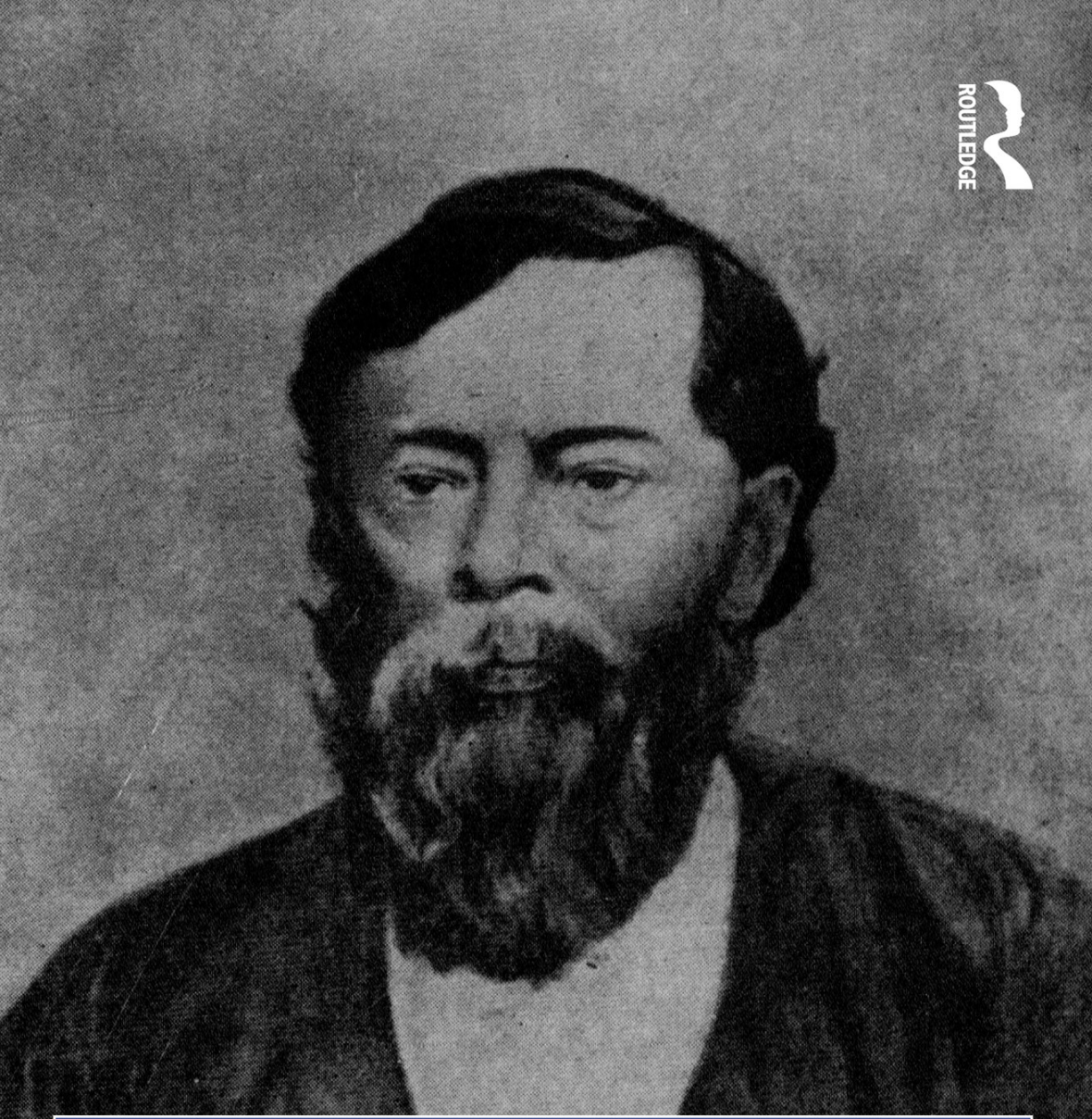

HINDUTVA BEFORE HINDUTVA

SELECTED WRITINGS AND DISCOURSES OF CHANDRANATH BASU IN TRANSLATION

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL BENGALI WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

AMIYA P. SEN

HINDUTVA BEFORE HINDUTVA

This book weaves the past with the present to trace and analyze the distinctive but reiterative evocations of Hindutva ideology in the modern-colonial period. It studies the concept of Hindutva as understood by its first major spokesperson Chandranath Basu, a formidable late nineteenth-century scholar-critic. The author examines the new rhetoric that has shaped Hindu ideologies in a colonial-modern context by foregrounding debates between Chandranath Basu and radical revisionists such as Rabindranath Tagore. It provides original translations of Basu's works and brings to light a long-neglected professional literary critic.

A unique contribution, this book will be an essential read for scholars and researchers of religion studies, history, postcolonialism, literature, Indian political thought, Indian history, political science, Hindu studies, Hindusim, sociology and political ideology, and South Asian studies.

Amiya P. Sen retired as Professor of Modern Indian History from the Department of History and Culture, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. Currently, he is Honorary Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, Oxford, UK.

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Selected Writings and Discourses of Chandranath Basu in Translation

Translated from the original Bengali with an Introduction by ***Amiya P. Sen***

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For my mamas and mashis of whom, unfortunately, I have seen very little

For those who are willing to set apart

the Hindu zeitgeist *from Hindutva*

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PREFACE

This book asked to be written, if only for correcting my own follies and disabusing interested scholars and readers of some misplaced assumptions about the subject. About 30 years back, in 1993, I had drawn attention to Chandranath Basu's *Hindutva, Hindur Prakrita Itihas* (Hindutva, An authentic history of the Hindus, 1892) and still have reason to believe that I was the first author to do so in a full-length monograph written in the English language. However, at the time this revelation went virtually unnoticed and it was only after 2014 once the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had secured a major electoral victory that there emerged some new interest in the subject. Even so, that interest, one has to say, has remained more ideological in nature than historical. In my experience, polemical battles between competing ideologies are more intense, multiply faster, and attract a wider audience than belabored academic debates.

In continuation with my previous researches and in the light of more recent findings, I am happy to present to the interested reader a relatively unknown but not unimportant figure from colonial Bengal who contributed significantly to the reiteration of an evocative Hindu ideology. The major question that Chandranath poses has to do with the framing of a new interpretative community of Hindus in a modern-colonial context. This is a question that he foisted upon Rammohun's older but very purposive use of the term "Hinduism" to construct a unified community of Hindus, whether real or imagined. Arguably, if there indeed was a conceptual category of Hinduism, it followed that there had also to be derivative, self-defining categories of the Hindu and Hinduness. This task called for both epistemologically and

aesthetically reconstituting the quintessential Hindu and what it meant to be Hindu.

Notwithstanding my previous work on the subject, the social media and distinguished scholars alike nonchalantly assumed, even as late as 2021, that it was Savarkar who had invented that term Hindutva. The tide appears to have turned with at least the Hindu Right showing greater alacrity and awareness in updating its information when compared to the Left-Liberal camp. I distinctly recall watching a video in which J. Sai Deepak patronizingly admonishes Shashi Tharoor for naively attributing the term to Savarkar. As far as I could make out, Sai Deepak took a special delight in invoking the name of Chandranath Basu in the quest of an established genealogy, and the intention here surely was to demonstrate how far back the term was in circulation. This no doubt pleased the Hindu Right which postulates unruptured cultural continuities in the Indic civilization. What most people overlooked here was that the use of the term Hindutva prior to Savarkar is rooted in a discernibly different discourse and a scale of values. It lacked both an unmitigated majoritarian flavor and a radical political edge. It was political in a cultural sense more than the combative and competitive.

As far as lineages go, I am now happy to state that the use of the term Hindutva goes further back in time than what both J. Sai Deepak and I had come to believe. Hence, Shashi Tharoor may now justly draw some consolation from the fact that one who publicly faulted him on facts was himself in error. In this book, I claim that the term Hindutva had entered the conceptual vocabulary of the Hindus by the mid 1880s, if not earlier. Frankly, what also surprised me was its popping up at the most unlikely places. As I shall presently demonstrate, it was a term used even by men such as Rabindranath Tagore who consistently questioned the Hindu mind relapsing into dubious conventions and irrationalities from the past. And it was used by the novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay who articulated an aggrieved and aggressive Hindu worldview without turning communal.

On the basis of my findings, I am now prepared to argue that the relationship between Hinduism and Hindutva is more complex than is generally believed, and further, that Hindu nationalism and Hindutva too are not always interchangeable terms. The former is a much wider and more diffused phenomenon, and there would have to be discursive choices at work suggesting why a particular Hindu nationalist chose to employ the term Hindutva or did not.

Especially since 2019, a lot of misinformation on Chandranath Basu has been circulating in the press and academia. People have taken him to be a son of an affluent zamindar, a disciple of the novelist Bankimchandra, the man who redefined Hindutva using an Advaitic tool, and the first to establish conservative values in Bengali literature. None of this would stand in the face of close scrutiny. Chandranath lived a rather modest middle-class life in

late nineteenth-century Calcutta and remained troubled by mounting family debts incurred on account of a fairly large family. On retiring from service, he requisitioned the government for an enhanced pension, albeit unsuccessfully. He admired Bankim's literary talent and often modeled his writings on his. On the other hand, he also drew upon his friend's writings to express and strengthen his own conservatism. More tellingly, it took him longer to distance himself from the dogmatic, obscure, ritual-laden, pseudo-scientific interpretations of contemporary Hinduism than was the case with Bankim. His work *Pashupatisamvad* (1884) Makarand Paranjape takes to be a survey of contemporary Bengali literature, whereas it was meant to be a political satire which so irked Bankim that he stopped the publication of the journal *Bangadarshan* where the work had been serialized. Chandranath was, for a long time, taken to be primarily a contributor to Bengali prose and literary criticism. I distinctly recall the incident at the National Library, Kolkata, which caused me no small surprise. Upon discovering that I was skimming through his *Hindutva*, the then Director, the late Rabindra Kumar Dasgupta presumed that I had to be a researcher in the Bengali language. I have every reason to be happy to claim Chandranath for history and historians.

Though I have been aware of the literary oeuvre of Chandranath for a long time, working on this remained a challenge, primarily on account of difficulties in accessing his works. In my generation, only a few Kolkata libraries had dilapidated copies of his major works, and more often than not, librarians were extremely wary of allowing readers to handle brittle copies, some of which crumbled at a mere touch. The digital revolution has now made it possible to obtain almost all his works, barring those published the earliest in contemporary journals.

When studying Hindutva, it would be quite misleading to confine one's attention to the 1892 work. What Chandranath took to be the vital constituents of Hindutva are scattered over his several works, and it is important that the researcher employ these gainfully. This is really my third attempt at writing about Chandranath. I am happy to have earlier contributed an article on Basu for the Brill's *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* and on his *Shakuntalatattva,* included in a Festschrift published in honor of Prof. Gita Dharmapal Frick, once my colleague at Heidelberg. While working on this book I have also functioned as a guest editor for a Special Issue of the MDPI online journal *Religions* on the theme "Hinduism and Hindu Nationalism: New Essays sin Perspective". That has made possible greater communication between scholars interested in the subject.

I still rue the fact that this manuscript could not be completed in the pristine surroundings of the IIAS, Shimla. This disappointment arrived at the end of an unsavory experience with the Institute management. The management initially agreed to consider me for the award of a National Fellowship or its equivalent for carrying out this project but subsequently went back on

its word. Perhaps they did not trust me with my conclusions. Having served the Institute for about three years as an editor for their biannual journal, *Summerhill*, I did feel badly let down.

In the course of carrying out this project, I also encountered multiple health issues; first, a fractured writing hand which left me immobile and indisposed for over three months and thereafter, hemorrhage in an eye, resulting in partial loss of vision. I have somehow pulled through these trying times, thanks to some self-belief and encouraging words from friends and family. Amusingly, I still find some consolation in the fact that my subject too struggled with a similar disability for a time.

I would be greatly remiss if I did not acknowledge my debts to Karunamoy Majmdar, Chandranath's only biographer to date in any language. I accidentally came upon this little-known biography at the University of Halle, Germany, back in 2004 and have admired it since for its thoroughness. But for this painstakingly compiled and meticulously researched monograph my own understanding of the life and work of Chandranath Basu would have been considerably poorer.

I am grateful also to the anonymous reviewer for offering some insightful and extremely helpful comments on the manuscript. The reviewer, it has to be said, got me wrong on one point. In this book, it was not my intention to establish Chandranath Basu as the first individual to coin the term Hindutva. On the contrary, I hope to have sufficiently established the fact that it was in circulation even before his time. All the same, Chandranath's *Hindutva,* given the present state of our knowledge, still remains the major contribution to the subject to appear in print before Savarkar's own work of 1923.

With a view to economising on space and to enhance the internal coherence of the text, I have selectively used ellipses to weed out redundant and only tangentially relevant material. This applies to all selections included in this work.

I am thankful to Routledge India for
promptly agreeing to publish this work.
Amiya P. Sen
Gurgaon, 2023

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Part I

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INTRODUCTION

> For a moment pause and ask: what have we left to ourselves? We have lost our political independence, our religion is now under attack, our literature has not yet advanced to the state of excellence of which we may justly be proud. What is it that we possess that might proclaim our distinctiveness as a civilization and instill in us a sense of self belief and pride? On the other hand, what we do possess and which you might rank as superstition and irrational regulations governing our society, I am not willing to let go!
>
> Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay*: Vividha Prabandha (1906)*

> Our ancient and perennially present society is now in a state of quiescence and inertia. The gigantic body with its massive, manly chest is now helplessly rolling on the ground and atop that sprawling supine, lifeless body the dance of destruction goes on: dancing with furious energy and excitement are moral reformers, religious reformers and social reformers!! The task of reform is not to destroy but to reinvigorate that which is dying. Sadly, we excel at this thoughtless destruction but lack the skills to build anew.
>
> Akshay Chandra Sarkar*: 6th Bengal literary Conference, Chittagong, 1913*[1]

The present work represents a renewed engagement with the study of Hindu conservatism in late nineteenth-century Bengal: renewed, because some 30

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years back, I had similarly attempted to understand the life and work of some figures which, at the time, I had chosen to call "Hindu revivalists". Scholarly objections have been raised since that time to my use of the terms "revival"/"revivalist" on broadly two grounds. First, the term revival itself has been found inept as a heuristic category. Contemporary Hinduism was "far from dead", so goes one argument, and hence, it could not really have been revived.[2] Some others, articulating broadly the same objection, have preferred the use of the term "recovery",[3] which, I thought, was quite synonymous in the intended meaning. More misplaced criticism came from those who took the category of revival to be both semantically and historically opposed to reform and to a progressive outlook upon life. In this understanding, revivalism was tantamount to a blind reverence for the past and an attempt to thoughtlessly return ideas and practices of the past.[4]

My rejoinder to the first set of objections has been simply that it was not the dead that could be revived but the dying and that as much of nineteenth-century literature produced in British India suggests, Hinduism and the Hindu way of life were indeed under some duress. This anxiety was quite palpable in the wake of the widow marriage controversy but peaked in the years 1890–1891 when an official move to amend the Indian Penal Code and marginally raise the existing age of consent brought about a near revolt, with even children and housewives taking to the streets of Calcutta in protest, crying hoarse about the "Hindu religion being in imminent danger". Thirty four mammoth protest meetings were convened in the city of Calcutta alone in the year 1891. To the charge that revivalism-represented obsolete, regressive, and antiquated thought and practice, my rejoinder has been twofold. First, revivalism never amounted to the thoughtless replication of the past but careful selection. The task, as I could make out, was far from easy. In truth, the complexity of this exercise even got to the finest of minds in nineteenth-century Bengal. At one place, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894) was persuaded to write thus:

> Let us revere the past, but we must, in justice to our new life, adopt new methods of interpretation and adapt the old, eternal and undying truths to the necessities of that new life.[5]

What struck me about this passage was Bankim's complexly juxtaposing the acts of adopting and adapting. The first suggests Bankim's acknowledging the fact that culture had to keep moving to keep abreast of changing circumstances whereas the second hints at the possibility of cultural change being purposively slackened if not altogether frozen in time. How could that which was timeless, eternal, and undying be adapted to suit changing times? Simply as a matter of definition, could the immutable and eternal also possess the qualities of malleability? The truth here which may not have escaped

Bankim himself was that he was caught between two stools: on the one hand, the strength of a tradition based on perceived fixities and acknowledged antiquity and on the other, the compelling requirement of making life move with time and history. The acuity of this conflict is manifest in his unfinished commentary on the *Bhagavadgita* (posthumously published in 1902) where he deferentially refers to the older commentary by Acharya Shankara, only to argue how the Acharya's commentary on select verses from the *Gita* would be unintelligible and grossly unsuitable for modern times.[6] The point, however, is that Bankim still had to fall back on the idea of a canonical text to press home the idea that the purity and authenticity of a text or tradition were considered directly proportional to its historically established age. And hence the choice of a classical Hindu text like the *Gita*. At heart, this argument reiterated the idea that extremely old civilizations like that of the Hindus were bound to be corrupted over time and hence required to be brought back to their original state of "purity" if at all they were to have a bearing on contemporary life.

That reformers often spoke in the idioms of revival is also borne out by the instance of raja Rammohun Roy (1772–1833), widely held as India's first modern individual. Rammohun is universally acknowledged as a religious reformer whereas what he was attempting in his own reckoning was a revival. In nineteenth century Bengal, the propagation of Vedanta could not have been come about without an air of innovation given the fact that the province had abounded in the study of Nyaya and Samkhya, both of which were hostile to Vedanta. It subsequently turned out to be a major repository of Vaishnava and Tantric manuscripts but not of the Vedic. Such was the poor state of knowledge of the *shruti* among Hindu Bengali pundits that when Rammohun initiated the translation of select Upanishads into Bengali, his orthodox critics charged him with committing forgery. Rammohun's major argument here was that only the return of Vedanta into public life could ensure the success of his twin modernist agendas: the scrapping of polytheism and of image worship, both of which were allegedly opposed to a rational and non-sectarian religion. The point, however, is that Rammohun consistently denied being an innovator *(adhunik*), arguing that all that had attempted was the return to the "true" methods of pious worship.[7] This sits well with the Hindu world-view that nothing is born *ex nihilio*. As opposed to the Semitic understanding, Hindu Vedanta stood more by the idea of a constructor God who had access to pre-existing material than a Creator God who did not possess these building blocks. As a Vedantin or a follower of the Vedanta, Rammohun's situating himself in the tradition of Acharya Shankara was for reasons similar to Bankim's choosing to engage with the *Shankarabhasya* on the *Gita*. It was a matter of taking stock of the rank and reputation of a man's legacy as generally accepted in the tradition. Both Rammohun and Bankim, though acknowledging their

debts to Shankara believed that they still had the hermeneutic freedom to say things the Acharya would never have said. This suggests that within the framework of colonial Hinduism, the more critical question was not opposition to change or its rebuttal but that of negotiating it along the lines of least resistance. Changes, if they were to endure, had to be delicately grafted upon the interstices of conformity. Even those wary of the challenges posed by European modernity could not have brushed aside the prospects and possibility of reform; their historical location simply forced them to devise suitable means to modulate these to their advantage.

In the present work, my preference for the term "conservatism" has been primarily on account of two reasons. First, over time, I have only grown more aware of the possible interpretative differences between acts of revival and conservation. On a very elementary level, conservatism may be said to prefer retaining the present over bringing back the past; revival, on the contrary, wishes to return to the past since it is dissatisfied with the present. Not all revivalists are conservatives and not all conservatives are convinced that a return to the past will work to their advantage. In the context of colonial India, however, traditionalism was also a matter of injured pride. It could be difficult to separate the two since a conservative utopia may not only want to perpetuate the present but also strengthen it by select references to the past. This combination of strategies was always possible in a people who felt threatened by alien and unfamiliar ways of life introduced under a new political regime. My second reason here has to do with the very social spread and an instinctive deep-rootedness of conservatism, cutting across class, caste, and gender. Allowing for rare exceptions, revivalist postures were best represented by the western educated urban bhadralok whereas a conservative reaction to visible alterations in thought, values, and rhythms of everyday life would be quite natural in even peasants and artisans, the rural gentry, Brahmin scholars and ritual experts and in certain settings, even mothers and housewives. As in the furor that broke out in 1890-91, the demonstrated power of reactive conservatism was based in several nondescript classes: ascetics, priests, petty shopkeepers and brokers, housewives, students, clerks, vendors, and wayfarers. While the aggrieved presence and participation of such classes has been documented, it has still not been possible to socially explain their grievance in any satisfactory measure.

The Many Voices of Hindu Conservatism

In a recent study of Chandranath Basu historian Tanika Sarkar has argued that Hindu conservatism has not yet been adequately studied.[8] Prima facie, this is uncontestable and yet, the statement conceals as much as it reveals. For one, Hindu conservatism was indeed the field of study in my 1993 work *Hindu Revivalism in Late Nineteenth Century Bengal* that ran into

over 450 pages.[9] What is more, to the best of my reckoning, this work was the first, at least in the English language, to treat the life and work of Chandranath and other prominent Hindu conservative figures of the day in any detail. The study included middle class interpreters of neo-Hinduism, traditional pundits and early prototypes of itinerant, English educated Hindu missionaries, the best known of which was no doubt, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902). Further, this work alluded, possibly also for the first time, to Basu's 1892 work *Hindutva, Hindur Prakrita Itihas* (Hindutva. An Authentic History of the Hindus). At the time,only a few took notice of the fact that the term "Hindutva" had been used about three decades before Savarkar in a monograph that ran into over 400 pages. To the best of my knowledge this work still remains the only work in an Indian language to explicitly carry such a title. However, the term Hindutva, as I shall presently argue, had entered the conceptual vocabulary of the Hindus by the 1880s and appears in the writing of even such people who were ideologically distant if not entirely removed. This has compelled me to renounce my own claim, originally made in 1993 and reiterated in 2017, about Chandranath Basu being the first to discursively use the term.[10]

Thanks to the digital revolution, I recently gained access to a fairly useful study of Hindu conservatism in nineteenth-century Bengal, written as far back as 1960.[11] This little-known work includes studies of several conservative figures that I have re-examined in this work. In her 2021 monograph, *Hindu Nationalism in India,* Sarkar had affirmed that the term Hindutva had indeed been coined by Savarkar[12], which she justly rectified in the 2022 paper. It is noteworthy though that neither my 1993 work nor that published in 1960 appears in Sarkar's 2022 study of Chandranath, which, not surprisingly, appears exceptionally thin in the matter of citations. The interested reader has virtually no clue as to where Sarkar might have obtained information on Chandranath's mentors like the Sanskritist Pandit Sasadhar Tarkachudamani (1851–1928) and his co-worker, the virulent Hindu missionary Krishnaprosonno Sen (1849–1902). The work also carries certain factual errors. For instance, Sarkar wrongly takes the journal *Prachar* to be founded by Pandit Sasadhar.[13] Nor was he the founder of the Monghyr-based *Bharatvarshiya Arya Dharma Prahirini Sabha*.[14] And while Chandranath certainly did not speak pejoratively of Islam,[15] he was vitriolic in his condemnation of the poet Nabinchandra Sen's (1847–1909) *Palashir Juddha* (1875) for empathizing with the deposed Nawab of Bengal.

> Why is he Hindu remorseful if the Muslims should lose Bengal? And why, if I may ask, does Mohanlal lament? Is it only because he is a servant of the Muslim? And as a Hindu should you not be upset at this?[16]

Basu's letter dated November–December 1896 was written at a time when, following the publication of Bankim's novels *Anandmath*(1882), *Rajsingha* (1882), and *Sitaram*(1884), Hindu-Muslim relations in Bengal had come under some strain.

Finally, Sarkar's study of Chandranath's thought is performed almost entirely from the perspective of a feminist critique and solely hinges upon the work *Hindutva*. A strong patriarchal outlook does pervade Chandranath's writings but does not exhaust the entire range of his discourse. After all, the status of the Hindu women was not the only issue on which Chandranath clashed with his ideological adversaries. Also, as I shall subsequently argue, on certain issues related to women, Chandranath's views were not any more conservative than some of his contemporaries including Bankim. Sarkar does not pause to consider the fact that Basu was the author of over half a dozen books some of which deal with behavioral, moral and philosophical issues concerning the Hindus. Fully upholding Sarkar's observation that Hindu conservative thought needs to be studied more fully, especially in relation to colonial modernity, we might just as well study the subject as much historically as ideologically.

Rather than persist with the study of revivalism, I prefer now to deal with the growth of Hindu conservatism as a phenomenon that proved to be more ubiquitous or widely dispersed. Its social spread was both horizontal and vertical in keeping with the expanding social network of the Bengali bhadralok but also its changing social composition, which, over the years, included many upwardly mobile intermediary castes and classes. The conservatism also deepened and intensified with first, the emergence of some common or widely shared anxieties and second, the visible strengthening of the vernacular press and platform.

However, it was also sufficiently variegated notwithstanding some common elements. As the conservative position crisscrossed with the revivalist, there also emerged, at times, varying emphasis within otherwise related issues. It was only outwardly that Hindu conservatism posed a common front; in reality, it was riddled with inner contradictions resulting from differences in emphases. Restoring a *dharmic* way of life was an agenda which appears commonly upheld by Hindu conservatives but with visible internal differences in understanding and social application. Beyond a point even Sanskrit pundits who joined the conservative camp with little or no knowledge of English, preferred at times to speak in the language of science if only because their middle class, English-educated patrons wanted to hear them speak in such idioms. Some conservative figures, as I shall argue, situated themselves within a Vedantic revival but in the late nineteenth century, Vedanta itself came to be divided into broadly two camps: one that was rooted in the classical Hindu idea of world renunciation and another, which accepted its metaphysical postulates minus its asceticism. As it turned out,

these camps also adopted perceptibly different non-religious agendas. The latter, best identified with Rammohun and the Brahmo community, chose religion as the site of social change; its main objective was to bring forth a reformed religion that would gloss over social tensions which impinged on the idea of common civic nationality. The other, increasingly adopted a more political posture whereby the Vedantic emphasis on the unity of all phenomenon became a source of empowerment. Chandranath begins his *Hindutva* with a Vedantic postulate which identifies man with the cosmos. Interestingly, of the five conservative or quasi-conservative figures that I have primarily discussed in this work (Bankimchandra, Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Rajnarayan Basu, Akshay Chandra Sarkar, and Chandranath), at least two (Bankim and Akshay Chandra) identified themselves primarily with devotional culture and the Vaishnava revival in modern Bengal rather than monistic Vedanta. Both Bhudeb and Chandranath on the other hand, combine a Vedantic worldview with Tantric praxis and for both, this represented serious efforts to re-energize the allegedly effeminate, emasculated, and cowardly Hindu Bengali who ran away from the smallest challenges. Other than Rammohun's biographer, Nagendranath Chattopadhyay, Bhudeb perhaps is the only contemporary figure to insist on drawing attention to the raja's Tantric antecedents. In a series of essays possibly written in the mid-1880s, Bhudeb was to argue that Brahmoism was, in fact, Sanatan Dharma in new garb, purposively born to counter the threat from evangelist Christianity.[17]

The Hindu revivalist was quite likely to be conservative in his thought but the reverse was not always true. It is quite possible to detect elements of cultural revivalism in Rammohun but not conservatism, especially of the kind that came to characterize late nineteenth-century Bengal. On the contrary, he was often charged with violating social and cultural norms by allegedly eating "forbidden food", mixing freely with not a particular Muslim but the Muslim community in general, fabricating Hindu scriptures, speaking of a God with whom most Hindus had grown unfamiliar, but above all for striking at the roots of Hindu patriarchy by aiding an alien government in legally abolishing the cultural practice of sati. The difficulty with a revivalist posture as Rammohun would have no doubt realized was that it called for a degree of modernist selectivity if it was to be of any contemporary relevance. Shankara Vedanta could not have been reproduced in its classical form since it called for several exclusions. It rested on a highly textual culture and privileges confined to the ritually highest caste. On the other hand, a reformed religion seeking to return the adoration of a True God would defeat its purpose by remaining socially differentiated. To be more meaningful it had to be accessible for all and yet, this struck at the very roots of tradition. Rammohun's opponents would have been clearly in the right had they accused him of a double jeopardy. In the first place, the raja had chosen to comment on no more than five Upanishads whereas even his *parama guru*, Shankara, had

commented on as many as ten. Such selectivity clearly distracted from the truth that the Upanishads spoke with many voices and hence open to conflicting interpretations. The choice of texts here was clearly aimed at internal consistency. Second, his claim that there was indeed an identifiable body of belief or practice that could be given the name "Hinduism" also called for the creation of an interpretative, more cohesive community of believers. So pressing was this task that Rammohun did not pause to consider if his translation of esoteric texts into the vernacular, no doubt a radical innovation in itself, could at all be relevant or intelligible even to the traditionally literate classes, not to speak of the quotidian. It is only fair to assume that like the educator Pundit Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891) after him, Rammohun expected virtuous knowledge to progressively percolate down from a literati to the masses. The Pundit's emphasis, if any, was really on secondary education, not primary.[18] Though associated with the revival of Vedanta in modern India, Rammohun eventually emerged as a figure who was more modern than a Vedantin. Also, he did not so much "modernize" Vedanta as choose to propagate elements within it that were amenable to modernity. Surely, this was what the conservatives, including the English educated among them, wished to avoid, not simply to escape the charge of innovation but more on account of the belief that European modernity was not something that could be successfully replicated in India. Some among them like Chandranath Basu, the focus of our study, even doubted the temporal sequence of tradition and modernity, claiming that rather than one succeeding the other they could both coexist in time.

In nineteenth century Bengal, conservatism was a ubiquitous phenomenon which is not to suggest that everyone who mattered in public life was innately conservative. On the other hand, elements of conservatism were present in most, barring very few exceptions. This conservatism could be manifest in several forms. It could exist simply as spontaneous resistance to an alien and unfamiliar culture; as a reaction to perceived threats to the existing social order, as some compensatory mechanism for perceived loss of power and authority or a pathological distrust of rapid or radical change. To such people Reform Hinduism would have felt like some cultural betrayal. Conservatism also had its base in objective material changes occurring in everyday life: consumerist inroads into an essentially subsistence economy that fed on paltry clerical budgets, growing problems of securing a livelihood, a sense of psychological abuse inflicted by official highhandedness and racialism but not least of all, in an as yet unexplained turn towards religiosity. The last is particularly important since conservatism often emerged in the wake of invigorated religious consciousness. In renascent Bengal, rational, scientific interrogations did make their presence felt from time to time but were never as powerful or pervasive as a religiously articulated sense of interiority, of shifting one's attention from an understanding of the phenomenal