

THE RENAISSANCE IN BENGAL AND MAHARASHTRIAN THOUGHT FROM 1850 to 1920*

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THE undoubtedly verified historical facts about the middle class intellectual movements in Eastern and Western India are that they were similar in so far as the middle class intellectuals in both the areas were reacting to the impact of English ideas and English social organization. The two movements were, however, dissimilar in so far as the movement in Bengal went further than it did in Maharashtra in the sense that it became too diverse to be contained within a sectarian religious world view, as also that the forefathers of the pioneers in Maharashtra were not debarred from all positions of power in the pre-British days as they were in Bengal. It would be argued in this paper that the two features were not entirely unrelated.

2. It is usual to understand the English assumption of power in Bengal in terms of a certain juxtaposition of forces. The Muslim power in Bengal was primarily a military one superimposed on an agricultural economy. By the time Alivardi Khan took over, the Hindus had consolidated into a solid intermediate class of landlords, merchants and superior artisans. The balance of power position was already precarious and was held together only by personal factors. Under the circumstances there is some case for conceding the view that what the English wanted was merely the exclusion of the French and a safeguarding of their interests. When they intervened militarily they toppled over the sovereign power more by accident than by design. It happened without their being aware of the full consequences. The skirmish at Plassey (1757) was obviously neither tactically nor strategically important.¹

3. As a matter of fact, the English did not take over administratively until after the calamitous famine of 1769. When they did, the judicial and revenue policies of the East India Company between 1770 and 1793 completely undermined not only the Muslim aristocracy but the Hindu landed aristocracy as well. Bengal, therefore, started more or less with a clean slate, socially, politically and economically, after 1793. The new landed gentry had nothing of the prestige or reference group status as its predecessors. In consequence, a whole set of people had to do a very considerable amount of rethinking about the values of life as also about how to

* Paper read at the Poona University Teachers' Social Science Seminar held on the 17th and 18th of February, 1962.

¹ Woodruff, Phillip, *The Men Who Ruled India, the Founders*, 1953, p. 103.