The discourse on nationhood woven around *samaj* developed in a specific socio-cultural climate and was conditioned by particular ideological and material contexts. It comprised a set of ideas, beliefs and tenets, which were articulated by a specific social and intellectual group: the western educated, mainly high caste, professional literati. The history of nationalism, it has been said, is as much a history of its interlocutors as of the ideology and movement itself.¹ The remark holds true to a deeper extent in the case of cultural nationhood, which is a matter of being and becoming, and is implicated in ideologies, beliefs, social origins and a pattern of living and interacting among the articulators of the discourse. Their way of life and internal society form a microcosm of the normative social/cultural mould or pattern, which was prioritised in their vision of nationhood seen through the prism of *samaj*. The story of nationhood must therefore begin by setting the history of the development of ideas about an empowered identity within the social contexts of the literati’s own internal *samaj* (their social world). As *samaj* was the conceptual tool for envisioning nationhood, the dynamics of this internal *samaj* were crucial in the conceptualisation of wider unities. Who were to be included within, or excluded from a wider, re-imagined *samaj* approximating the nation? The Bengali intelligentsia attempted to rethink the components of what they considered to be their ‘own’ *samaj*, as well as elements outside this *samaj*. The social changes within the literati’s own *samaj* accelerated the quest for identity along specific lines. Simultaneously, the colonial presence and allegations that Bengalis were a history-less and identity-less people underscored the need for a reinvention of the indigenous, and the forging of an empowered identity. The particular ways in which this occurred stemmed from the changing and shifting parameters of the literati’s own *samaj*. Inclusions and exclusions, worked

out on the basis of social and cultural parameters (reflecting changes in the literati’s *samaj*) therefore conditioned the ontology of being and becoming a nation in the mind of the Bengali intelligentsia.

A historicist perspective delving the social parameters underlying the discourse is used to explain its main terms and trajectories, linking social foundations and beliefs to practice, or to the world of everyday experiential realities (*samaj*-in-practice). The theoretical stance fuses methodologies of social and intellectual histories to trace finer interconnections at social and ideological levels to explain the roots of the literati’s beliefs and ideas, and the ways in which the latter were disseminated. The perspective of intellectual history involves the evaluation of the literati’s ideas (including those of less well-known personalities) and situating them in the social and political context. The attempt to trace the history of their thoughts and ideas would involve an exploration of the linkages they had with language and communications. It would imply a careful reading of the texts so as to discover what was left unsaid, and the stresses and silences of these works would form the basis for envisioning the intellectual world of the Bengali elite. The trajectory of intellectual history is conjoined to social history perspectives, exploring the world of the literati, and the ways in which this world conditioned their conceptions of social ‘others’ who were to be co-opted / excluded. The melding of intellectual and social history perspectives problematises the relation between text on the one hand, and belief and practice on the other. In other words how can one account for the transition from ideas expressed in a text, to idea-in-practice? This chapter attempts to explore how this happened.2

The perspective delineated above would help in tracing the springs and dynamics of authorial intention, as well as the audience and reach of their

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2 For instance, the idea of the primacy of Sanskrit and of its connection with Bengali expressed in texts such as Rajnarain Basu’s *Anusthan Patra* and in various articles in the Brahmō-based journals, *Aryadarshan* and *Nabja Bharat*, became a belief and practice through specific means. Societies such as Banga Bhashanushilan Samiti and the Medinipur Sabha drew on texts to promote the enrichment of Bengali. The spread of ideas expressed in texts through such organisations helped in their crystallisation as group belief and practice. The prose of Rammohun Roy, Vidyasagar and Bankimchandra elevated Bengali, making it part of a linguistic agenda interlocking with *jātītva* expressed in *itihas* written in Bengali. Similarly the idea of certain customs, manners and conduct as constituting the core of cultural *Aryan*ism expressed in texts such as Rajnarain Basu’s *Se Kal ar E Kal* (Calcutta, 1876), gained currency in the realm of *sama-jik* practice. Shibnath Shastri described how such norms became a part of everyday life.