The ideological, social and material settings within which the discourse on nationhood developed provide causative frames of reference for understanding the intricacies of the literati’s ideas about an empowered identity. This implied a nuanced process of self-definition, as well as the conceptualisation of a wider social and cultural universe (connected contextually with political processes) within which diverse groups could be included. The endeavour involved a reconfiguration of terms most directly concerned with, and reflective of identity. Colonial allegations of Bengalis being a history-less people who had never been a nation, evolving contexts of colonial sociology, and comparative evaluations of the Bengali self (groups within Bengal) and other Indians accelerated the quest for identity. A reframing of identity which could simultaneously deal with the colonial challenge and stereotyping of the colonised as an identity-less melange of communities devoid of national feeling, as well as with the issue of multiple identities needed to be articulated in an indigenous rhetoric and connotative grid, and situated within longer, historical traditions of identity and lineages of unity in Bengal. Jati was a key site around which such ideas about identity came to be woven. This chapter interrogates this conceptual category to demonstrate how its dual meaning of multifacetedness and its overarching nature joining various sub-types was deployed in recasting identities in Bengal and

1 See W.W. Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal* (London: 1868, reprinted, 7th edition, 1897; Smith, Elder and Co.), p. 87. The colonial belief that Bengalis had no history and had never been a nation was strongly challenged. Attempts to counter this allegation formed the basis of the Bengali discourse on identity.

2 Jati was a multidimensional term implying birth, race, caste, sub-caste, tribe and nation. This indigenous term cannot be regarded as a counterpart of the western notion of race /ethnicity in its narrow biological sense because it encompassed a range of meanings. However, race in a wider sense also has multiple meanings, and jati can be linguistically related to genus. Partha Chatterjee has drawn attention to the multiple uses of jati in his article, “The Manifold Uses of Jati” in T.V. Satyamurthy (ed.), *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). Existing literature however, eludes the ways in which jati was related to samaj in a historically structured and indexed discourse on cultural nationhood.
beyond. As the term could imply both division (multifacetedness) and unity (overarching nature), jati was unique in acting as a site for forging unity alongside, and in contention with bonds of caste, class, clan, micro-region and ethnic category. It provides a heuristic field for seeing how interactions between multiple scales of identity were negotiated and mediated by the literati in their discourse on nationhood envisioned through samaj. Before discussing how this happened, I argue that the significance of jati emanated from its inextricable link with quests for an indigenous history. The conscious interplay between identity and history was a crucial starting point and basis for the imagination of wider unities developing within the analytic frame of samaj. This chapter explores how jati was deployed in dual contexts of forging an empowered identity through a quest for a ‘new’ indigenous history, and connecting the multiple meanings of jati to its overarching nature in a discourse seeking to weld diverse groups, and mediate issues of minorities within and beyond Bengal.

As mentioned earlier, the relationship between Indians and the British raj underwent changes from the second half of the nineteenth century, which then started governing the inner dynamics of empire. These changes, as well as earlier patterns of interaction between the coloniser and the colonised influenced the ways in which earlier inchoate ideas about identity acquired new forms even while retaining connotative and ideological lineages formed across a longue durée. Official and non-official writing, colonial sociology and transformations within the indigenous society and cultural arena opened up a space for the reconfiguration of categories such as ‘caste,’ ‘the Indian people,’ ‘race’ and the ‘Indian nation.’ In Bengal, the quest for a redefinition of the self enmeshed with a cultural nationalist agenda to promote jatiya uplift based on the idea of self-help, which had been popularised since the opening decades of the nineteenth century. More contemporaneously (for purposes of the discourse) self-help was anticipated in the deliberations of the Tattvabodhini Sabha (1839) and in various articles in the Tattvabodhini Patrika (1843). This chapter studies concrete expressions of cultural identity and notions of unity which set the immediate context and formed an ideational prelude for seeing how ideas about identity articulated through a connection between history and jati came to be lodged within the analytic frame of samaj. The programmatic thrust for this came from the Hindu Mela (started in 1867). This chapter develops the analysis of such concrete event / agenda-oriented recastings of identity by focusing on the equally important related theme of identity linked to the agenda of a ‘new’ history.