In the previous chapter I have shown how constructions of *jati* were implicated in ‘new’ ideas about history in the literati’s discourse on an empowered identity during the second half of the nineteenth century. The imagination of the collective self through reconfigurations of *jati* attempted to conceptualise a basis for a wider unity that could weld discrete elements within Bengal (castes, sub-castes, regions, religious communities) as well as groups outside it. It was a complex process wherein the concept of *jati* as one of the indigenous identity-categories formed a starting point for the discourse on nationhood as it was an interactive frame for multiple scales of identity, and a site for joining various groups. Despite this, its multifacetedness left room for fragmentation and splintering of unities. It could signify both unity and division in different contexts. A stronger foundation and ideological basis for ideas about unity were needed. In this chapter I interrogate the relatively unexplored conceptual category of *samaj* as deployed by the literati to see how it acted as a means for negotiating complex sets of loyalties and identities, and envisioning a wider unity cutting across variations of caste, region and locality. The deployment of *samaj* by the literati reflected an nuanced interplay between the themes of continuity and unity in the ontology of nationhood. By illuminating links between ideas about the modern nation and the historical society from whence it emerged (as reflected in the literati’s discourse), I shift the focus from modernist definitions of the nation.\(^1\) Ideas about nationhood, I argue, had indigenous origins, which were oriented to a shared world of values and conduct. In highlighting

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such origins, I seek to demonstrate how the notion of a nation grounded in *samaj* moves beyond academic models which regard colonial nationalisms as ‘borrowed’ and/or ‘derivative’, and stress the tremendous difficulty in transcending ‘western’ paradigms. This chapter illuminates how the notion of a nation in colonial Bengal was produced through a complex interaction between reorientations of indigenous ideas of past unities and the influences and contexts of the late colonial situation. Indigenous inheritances, reoriented and refracted through the prism of *samaj*, interacted with the associational ties of the ‘modern’ colonial civil society to produce the idea of a nation. To unravel the intricacies of such interaction and interconnection, I situate *samaj* in two interrelated connotative and temporal contexts, which fused the past and the present in the imagining of nationhood. First, it implied the historical community from whence the nation emerged. Second, it was a social actuality or an experiential reality having a modern functionality.

The 1860s constituted a watershed in ways of articulating and disseminating ideas. The aftermath of the Mutiny-Rebellion of 1857, the Ilbert Bill Controversy (1883) and colonial sociology metamorphosed patterns of interaction between the ruler and the ruled, leading to new ways of rethinking the self, which enmeshed with the cultural-nationalist agenda of the Hindu Mela (1867). I argue that during the period 1867–1905, the conceptualisation of nationhood in terms of culture was a major trajectory in rethinking identity. As explained in the Introduction, this

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2 Benedict Anderson has viewed nationalism as modular, which makes it possible to transplant it to a great variety of social terrains. It can merge with various political and ideological constellations. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

3 See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. According to Partha Chatterjee colonial middle classes adopt the enlightenment world-view through education and their views become echoes of dominant western political discourses. Such a position ignores the fact that not all aspects of colonial power knowledge were accepted. Moreover, Chatterjee’s emphasis on the overwhelming sway of the state makes culture co-extensive with politics. Colonial western cultural hegemony is thus homogenised, all-pervasive and irresistible within its own domain, and seen as being without internal tensions. Those touched by it become capable only of derivative discourses. Resistance is relegated to precolonial community consciousness. But this chapter shows that *samaj* was not merely an ur-traditional relic. Precolonial *samajik* unities were reoriented in the modern period and related to *samaj* as an experiential reality or an idea-in-practice.

4 As this line of argument focuses on conceptions of nationhood grounded in culture rather than politics, its outer limit is 1905 when political action crystallised in the Swadeshi Movement.