Ideas about nationhood grounded in *samaj* problematised the issue of creating unity alongside, and in contention with fragmentation. We have seen how the splintering of identities along lines of caste, sub-caste and sub-region was negotiated via the conceptual category of *samaj* in Bengal. The literati’s discourse sought to forge an overarching unity among the upper castes in Bengal (Brahmans, Baidyas and Kayasthas)\(^1\) between the interstices of difference through the deployment of *samaj*, seen as emblematic of unity in past (historical) contexts of medieval multi-caste *samaj*, and juxtaposing it to colonial experiential realities of social mobility. What remained a significant issue was the mediation of the ‘others’ of high caste Bengali *samaj*: the ‘lower orders’ encompassing a multilayered group of low castes, low classes, *adivasis* (original inhabitants, usually applied to non-Aryan tribal groups), and untouchables. How was their ‘otherness’ reconstituted and mediated in the discourse on nationhood woven around the idea of *samaj*? The inclusion/exclusion of ‘lower orders’ was crucial because of two main reasons. First, they formed a contrasting image of the high-caste, professional, elite *samaj* of the literati, and helped define the latter through comparison. Second, they could not remain marginal to the discourse because the recreation of a *jati* through the conceptual tool of *samaj* implied conceptualisations of wider unities. By tracing the specific ways in which the idea of *samaj* mediated the otherness of ‘lower orders’ in Bengal, and co-opted specific groups among them, I suggest that the literati’s discourse cannot be simplistically considered as a hegemonic and homogenised high-caste and high-Hindu metanarrative absorbing the particularisms of ‘lower orders’ through discourses of power, which were seamless and without internal

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\(^1\) The traditional fourfold caste division: Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras was absent in Bengal and there were only two major divisions: Brahmans and Shudras. The high castes in Bengal included the Brahmans and the Baidyas and Kayasthas (the latter two groups belonged to the upper section of Sat Shudras). The distinctive features of the caste system and its origins and development in Bengal are discussed in the course of this chapter.
Chapter Four

This chapter illuminates how *samaj* mediated the fragmentation of Indian society in vertical terms, that is as a hierarchical chain where each caste/group knows its own place and has a fixity,\(^2\) as well as in regard to peripheries or outer margins.\(^3\) Such mediations set the discourse on ‘lower orders’ in finer and nuanced contexts of multiple layers of inclusion, co-opting and situational exclusion of specific groups and categories.

In tracing the main lines of the discourse, I consider how the axes of caste and class identity came to be interrelated in debating and addressing the issue of otherness of the ‘lower orders’ in Bengal. In late colonial Bengal, caste and class intertwined in restructuring groups and imbuing them with social status, which did not, in all cases, derive solely from high caste affiliation (the pride of *kula*). Class, seen as social rank, paralleled and intersected with the importance deriving from inherited *kula* (caste) identity and status. This does not elide the use of ‘class’ in the sense of economic groups such as peasants, manual labourers and workers, who were also considered as contextual ‘others’ of high-caste Bengali society. The intersection of the categories of caste and class explains why I use the term ‘lower orders’ to include both ‘low’ and ‘excluded’ castes as well as ‘low’ classes. Stretching across a wide spectrum, the ‘lower’ groups and categories could include *adivasis*, lower castes, lower occupational groups (manual labourers, workers, coolies on Assam tea plantations), and villagers, as well as relatively lower urban groups verging on the

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\(^2\) According to Louis Dumont, hierarchy is the core value behind the caste system. Though in certain cases hierarchy is associated with power, Dumont believed that there was no need for this. The ideological foundations of hierarchical values in India inhered in the fact that India has always been mired in spiritual and otherworldly concerns. See Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, translated by Mark Sainsbury et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 20. This line of thought has been critiqued: Nicholas B. Dirks believes that this viewpoint is deeply problematic and as old as Orientalism itself. See Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), p. 5.

\(^3\) The margins imply boundaries which are seen as the segregated outer peripheries of the world of higher castes. See Partha Chatterjee, “The Nation and its Outcasts”, in *The Nation and its Fragments* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994). The issue of marginalities has come to occupy a crucial place in current Indian historiographies. ‘Margins’ encompass a variety of supposed and stereotypical ‘others’ of the nation, including tribal others, women, *adivasis*, *dalits* and untouchables. Attempts to ‘rescue’ the forgotten and silenced others of the nation and bring them back or write them into histories of India have focused on *dalit* movements, constructions of identities on the part of ‘tribals’ and the ways such identities have figured in major watershed-events and movements (such as the recent engagement with how and what roles the *dalits* played in the Revolt of 1857).