The literati conceptualised a wider unity through a two-way process of imagining identity. Notions of identity flowed out from a samajik core to evaluate internal others such as the ‘lower orders’ within Bengal, and the relatively ‘external’ but immediately contiguous neighbouring ethnicities. At the same time they turned inwards to critically assess characteristics of the Bengali self in its sub-regional dimensions. Such mediations formed part of the complementary relationship between the self and the other.\(^1\) They were also a means of knowing the (regional) whole through the parts. The literati’s evaluative eye viewed sub-regional ‘essences’ as links in the construction of a regional self. The idea of samaj deployed to negotiate fragmentations of caste, class and ethnic category within and beyond Bengal approximated imaginings of nationhood at interrelated planes of ideological and sociological connections. In regard to the conceptualisation of Bengal as a region having a distinct identity, the category of samaj was linked to perspectives of micro histories, familial narratives and genealogical accounts which illuminated sub-regional particularisms and underlying linkages between them. These undergirded the process of reifying and remaking the region through a delineation of its cultural, territorial and political boundaries. These boundaries supplemented and complemented the notion of Bengal as a historical, emotive, lived-in samajik space, and animated the connection between society and culture on the one hand and political processes on the other. The mediation of specific social, sociological and cultural identities formed around nuclei of micro-region and locality was a significant sociological technique deployed to knit the different sub-regions in Bengal and approximate the idea of the regional self. The latter, it was believed, got its unique character only through the manifold sub-regional variations.

\(^1\) The ‘self’ in this context implies the idea of an overarching, pan-Bengali regional self as an ideological extension of the concept of samaj. The ‘others’ of this self were sub-regional localisms and particularities which were contextual intra-regional sub-selves, as their incorporation into the wider Bengali regional samaj formed a crucial part of the discourse.
Eminent intellectuals such as Rabindranath Tagore and Bipin Chandra Pal had long sought seeds of this unity amidst apparent local diversities. It was hoped that micro-level studies focusing on histories of specific sub-regions of Bengal would illuminate veiled aspects of Bengali history, bridge gaps between seemingly discrete historical events, and knit historical processes in a meaningful regional integration. At the same time, they would provide the basis for transiting to a higher level of unity. “The unfolding of diverse historical processes” would imbue nationhood with new meanings through their “co-existence and complex interconnections at the all India level.”

While secondary literature on regional histories of Bengal3 is not scarce, there has been little exploration of intra-regional differences and similarities, and their relation to reconfigurations of jati and samaj in the literati’s imagination. This study attempts to show how the agenda of a redefined jati intertwined with applications of samaj to both sub-regional and regional contexts to explain and connect local distinctiveness to the overarching notion of the Bengali samaj and approximate the notion of pan-regional unity. Secondary literature does not explain intricacies embedded in trajectories of connections between the whole and the parts. For example, they do not show how local legends (operating at sub-regional levels) about samajik formation were grafted to ‘main’ samajik legends such as that of Adisur to form a ‘grand’ narrative of a pan-Bengali samajik unity.4 They also miss the sense of historical and social contexts that are indispensable for explaining the subtle variations in the literati’s evaluations of sub-regional histories. These are to be related to individual and group backgrounds, familial experiences, and caste, sub-caste and sub-regional loyalties and affiliations. By highlighting such parameters, I locate the discourse on sub-regional identities within broader intellectual debates and sociological and cultural dichotomies. As shown in the previous chapters the central thematic of the Aryan/non-Aryan divide

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2 The quoted words have been taken from Ranajit Dasgupta, *Economy, Society and Politics in Bengal: Jalpaiguri, 1869–1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), Introduction.


4 Existing literature eludes finer nuances of how parallel legends were deployed to connect the local to the regional in a common stream of social history. The famous social historian of Bengal, Nagendranath Basu narrated the legend of Adityasur of Rarh, similar to the ‘main’ Adisur legend as part of an endeavour to interrelate sociological streams at sub-regional and pan-regional levels.