

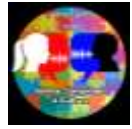
Literary Societies and Social Science, Literature In 19th Century Bengal

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Systematic reflection and research on social questions started in India, particularly in Bengal in the 19th century. British colonial rule, the impact of new ideas, the zeal of the missionaries to introduce Christianity created a new awakening among the indigenous intellectuals to look afresh at the age old institutions and customs. There were the revivalists who sought to provide new justification and new arguments in support of the prevalent system. There were the pro-changers or the modernists who advocated for changing the system and adopting western values, ideologies and educational systems. And there were those who advocated for a synthesis of the old and the new to regain the best of our own tradition while adopting the new humanitarian values and institutions of the west. As a result, if we look at the nature of discourse in the 19th century, we find a new rejuvenation at the elite level and an unprecedented social churning.

Some thinkers have identified the process as Bengal renaissance and have compared it to the similar type of process which occurred in Europe in 16th and 17th century. But it is debatable whether this new intellectual awakening can be compared with the process of renaissance in Europe as the number and percentage of people involved in this intellectual awakening was limited to urban upper class people only and the vast number of people, living in the countryside, remained relatively unaffected by the process. Undoubtedly society was experiencing an upheaval which had a jerking effect upon the people in general.

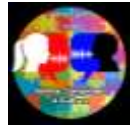
In Europe, the impact of the French revolution and the enlightenment was felt upon the society and the issue was how to maintain social order. This prompted men to look at the very basis of society leading to the question of how society is possible. In explaining the development of Sociology in Europe, Nisbet, in his *The Sociological Tradition*, had this to say, "The fundamental ideas of European Sociology are best understood as responses to the problem of order created at the beginning of the 19th century by the collapse of the old regime under the blows of industrialism and revolutionary democracy. The breakup of the old order in Europe – an order that had



rested on kinship, land, social class, religion, local community and monarchy – set free, as it were the varied elements of power, wealth and status that had been consolidated, however precariously, ever since the middle ages. Dislocated by revolution, scrambled by industrialism and forces of democracy, these elements can be seen tumbling across the political landscape of Europe throughout the 19th century in search of new and more viable contexts”.¹

Nothing of this stranglehold happened in India. Colonial stranglehold stood in the way of freedom and democracy, there was no direct exposure to revolutionary ideas of freedom and equality, no tradition of prolonged conflict between the religious and temporal authority, no operation of the orthogenetic process of change, except to some limited extent. Yet upon such a relatively static and immobile society, the impact of westernization, the introduction of a new system of education and the rise of an indigenous elite was being felt. Throughout 19th century, we find the operation of this process. Bengal was as the centre of such a whirlpool, though there was some parallel resurgence in western India also.²

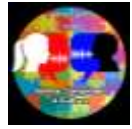
Interest on social issues, reflection and research on social questions and a thorough empirical orientation towards social issues- all these characterised the intellectual concerns of the emerging elites in 19th century Bengal. This intellectual concern had two important directions. First, some prominent intellectuals and social reformers of the period began to raise fundamental social questions. Their greatest asset was the possession of a rational and inquisitive mind with the help of which they were all contemplating the social reality of the time. Prominent among them were Rammohan Roy (1771-1833), Akshay Kumar Dutta (1820-1886), Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91), Bhudev Mukhopadhyaya and quite a few others. Bengal was the centre of such reformist orientation. Second, it was at this period that many academic and professional societies were established. The Asiatic Society of Bengal (1784), The Academic Association (1828), The Tattwa Bodhini Sabha (1831), The Bethune society (1851), The Bengal Social Science Association (1866) were a few examples of such academic bodies. Scientific attitude to social issues and social problems, rational approach towards the factual aspects of different segments of society differentiated this period from the earlier metaphysical and philosophical approach to society. We begin with an elaboration of



some of such academic bodies and schools before we take up the individual contributions of some important thinkers of this period.

It was not only that the interests of these bodies and individuals were only on the things 'social'. There was a strong evidence of the increased interests in things 'scientific'. The Calcutta Journal of Natural History was established in 1840. Dwarakanath Tagore, Ramkamal Sen, Durgacharan Bhattacharya and a few others were closely associated with it. Writing about the intellectual climate of mid-nineteenth century, Bela Dutta Gupta says, "*The whole intellectual climate in contemporary Calcutta was really and truly surcharged with science and things scientific. In individual lectures, writings in journals, newspapers, there was a constant demand for the study, teaching and dissemination of scientific knowledge. In the pages of the Tattwabodhini Patrika, in the columns of Sambad Prabhakar, logic for technical school, agricultural institutes, researching on improved methods of cultivation, was repeated again and again. In 1854, Col. Goodwin's Paper on 'Union of Science, Industry and Art' read before the Bethune Society, is an important index of the people's demand for applied science in this country.*"³ Behind the establishment of the Asiatic Society in 1784 by Sir William Jones, there was this idea of the unity of knowledge in all its diverse manifestations. To William Jones, '*History, Science and Art*' constituted the trinity of human learning or knowledge. In his own words, "*The first (history) comprehends either on account of natural productions or the genuine records of empire and states; the second (Science) embraces the whole cycle of pure and mixed mathematics together with ethics and law, as far as they depend on the reasoning faculty*"⁴ The birth of the Asiatic Society in 1784, as it has been rightly said, is significant for its 'quest for secular salvation'. Again "*the Asiatic Society ... became the central figure in the development of legion other organizations. There was an unprecedented enthusiasm for literary, philosophical and scientific illumination in such societies. Development of a scientific outlook was followed by a rationalistic climate of opinion. Institutions of long standing were being questioned and their rationale challenged. This type of society become the centre of reforming zeal of neophytes*".⁵

The Hindu College was established in the year 1817. The establishment of the college symbolized the growing demand for western education. It was ensured from the very

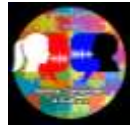


beginning that the Hindu college does not teach abstruse Hindu theology and metaphysics but such thinkers as Hume, Reid, Bentham, Mill or others. Adhir Chandra Dass, a student of Hindu College, while writing about his experience, tells, “*I have already enjoyed the blessings of liberal educations ... and yet the education I have received has taught me principles opposed to those that have been professed and practiced by my ancestors*”. Of course, in this process, there was no unmixed adulation to western knowledge but an attempt, on the part of many to combine the elements of eastern and western thoughts, a synthesization of the civilizations or ancient and modern times. The zeal for social reform and adopting a rational attitude for the study of social institutions and processes, resulted in the establishment of various associations, the Tattwabodhini Sabha, the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge, the Dharma Sabha, the Bengal British Indian Society or the Bethune Society. In most cases, those societies or associations were launched and operated by the alumni of the new schools.

Thus Derozio and his pupils started in 1828 the *Academic Association*. Because of their uncompromising stand on various social issues, the Young Bengals, as they were known as were regarded the “Athenians of India“ Their magazines, the *Parthenon* and the *Jnananeswan* acted as a forum of free expression on social issues. Their new gods were Bacon, Locke, Hume, Smith, Paine or Bentham. But because of their overdosing, they attracted the wrath of the conservatives and reformists alike and due to sudden death of Henry Derozio, the association soon became defunct.

Somewhat frustrated by the negligible effect of their revolt against Hinduism and the strong counter effect of conservative Hindu society, most of the Derozians ultimately turned dipsomaniac. Arabinda Ghosh told about them in a sarcastic tone “They were giants and did everything gigantically. They read hugely, wrote hugely, thought hugely and drunk hugely”

With the demise of the Academic Association Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge was formed and the initiative in this respect was taken by such contemporary intellectual stalwarts like Tarini Charan Bannerjee, Ramgopal Ghosh, Ramtanu Lahiri, Tarachand Chakrabarty and Raj Krishna Dey. The avowed objective of the society was to “create a determined and well regulated love of study, which will

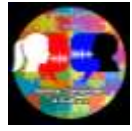


lead us to dive deeper than the mere surface of learning and enable us to acquire a respectable knowledge on matters of general and more specially of local interest.” The *transactions* of this society show how diverse was the nature of the papers presented there: “Reform, civil and social among educated natives” and ‘on the nature and importance of historical studies’ by Rev K.M. Banerjee, “*A sketch on the condition of Hindu Women*” by Peary Chand Mitra, ‘The philosophy of dissections’ by Prasanno Kumar Mitra etc. The variety of the topics presented and their empirical orientation shows how objective and scientific they were in identifying their topics of research.

It may be mentioned here that in the early 1833, they even brought out ‘*Vijnan Swar Sangrahas*’ a bi-lingual monthly on scientific subjects. Their aim was “*to publish such selections from the works of European literature and science as may tend to enlarge the sphere of their moral sentiments*”.⁶

Tattwabodhini Sabha, Tattwabodhini Patrika and Akshay Kumar Dutta

The *Tattwabodhini Sabha* was established in 1830 as a successor to Brahma Samaj. Though the declared objective of the Sabha was ‘extensive propaganda of Brahmo Dharma’, It eventually became the forum for analysis and amelioration of social maladies. The Tattwabodhini Patrika became the mouthpiece of such social concerns of the sabha. A perusal of the articles published in the patrika will bear that out. R.C Dutta has commented “*Scientific articles, moral instructions, account of different nations and tribes, stories of the animate and inanimate creations- all that could enlighten the expanding intellect of Bengal and dispel darkness and prejudices, found a convenient vehicle in the Tattwabodhini Patrika*”.⁷ The scientific orientation of the articles and their social concerns made the patrika a leading exponent of positivist orientation at that time. This is what N.K. Bose had to say, “*The Tattwabodhini Sabha and the Tattwabodhini Patrika were destined to play a significant part in the moral and intellectual reconstruction of Bengal. The journal published information on Science, History and Social Affairs; answered charges levelled by Christian missionaries. And although it played a defensive role, it made people feel proud of their civilization in its reformed version, and rendered satisfied pride the basis of an acceptance of the best which the west had to offer*”.⁸



The key figure behind Tattwabodhini Patrika was Akshay Kumar Dutta (1820-1886) who was a thorough rationalist in orientation and scientific in temperament. He was concerned with the relation of human beings with the external nature (মানবপ্রকৃতির সাথে বহির্জগতের সম্পর্ক) and in his scheme of things god or any supra mundane existence has no relevance. He even formulated the following equation:

Labour = crop

Prayer + Labour = Crop

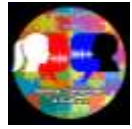
So, Prayer = 0

Akshay kumar's positivist orientation led him to believe that the only motto of human existence is to serve humanity. It is interesting to note that Vidyasagar was associated with Akshay Kumar in running the patrika. Both of them were thoroughly secular. Once, when a certain person complained to Debendranath regarding the way the Patrika was being run, Debendranath commented "*kotokguli nastic mile patrikata chalachchhe*". Through his writings, Akshay Kumar made substantive contributions in the fields of criminology and penology, sociology of education and it's the matter of organic relation between the individual and society. He also drew the attention of the public to the distressing condition of the peasantry in Bengal and about the general agrarian situation. Rightly, the Hindu Patriot described Akshay Kumar as the 'Ornament to the republic of letters in Bengal'.

The role of Rammohan, Vidyasagar and Bhudev Mukhopadhyay as stalwarts in the process of intellectual reawakening and social reconstruction in Bengal has been noted equally empathically by many others. And we are not entering into a detailed discussion about them here.

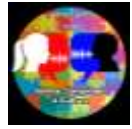
The Bethune Society

It was an Englishman, Mowatt, who established the Bethune Society in 1851 as a mark of respect to Drinkwater Bethune. The declared objective of the society was "*to promote among the educated natives of Bengal a taste for literary and scientific pursuits and encourage a freer intellectual intercourse than can be accomplished by other means in the existing state of native society.*" Towards this end, the society



engaged itself in discussing various social, economic and political issues. In 1858-59, the society's academic activities were divided into six sections. These were: (i) General education (ii) Literature and philosophy (iii) Science and art (iv) Medical and sanitary improvement (v) sociology and (vi) female education. Rev James Long was in charge of sociology section. James Long's approach was thoroughly empirical. He prepared 50 questions in the subjects requiring investigation in the social conditions of the natives. Objectivity was the sole aim of the new discipline. He observed "Without the practice of close observation, little progress can be made in sociology, which is to be presented not from books but from personal observation of men and things."⁹ The questionnaire framed by James Long were so full of details that as Rev. A. Duff, President of the Society, remarked even if half of the questions were sincerely answered 'from them a volume might be prepared' which would embellish the story of oriental literature.' It may be mentioned here that Rev. Lal Behari Dey was the secretary of the sociology section and he also made substantial contribution in the field of village studies. Justice Dwarakanath Mitra who was the president of the 'Improvement and Amelioration of Women Section of the Bethune' society was a great positivist and was at the forefront of the positivist movement in Bengal as we shall see later. Summing up the contributions of the Bethune society, Prof. Bela Dutta Gupta says "*The renaissance contribution of the Bethune society was unique. No other organization could effect such intellectual awakening and activities as the Bethune Society did.*"¹⁰ The Bethune Society ceased functioning from 1870".

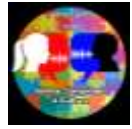
Somewhat independently of the Bethune Society but carrying the heritage of doing work on the basis of scientific observation and analysis, we can mention here three other works on rural society and the condition of the peasantry, all of which were done by Indians. These are *The Bengal Peasant Life* (1872) by Rev. Lal Bihari Dey, *The Peasantry of Bengal* (1874) by Ramesh Chandra Dutta and the *Indian Ryot* (1881) by Abhaya Charan Das. All these three books made monumental contribution in comprehending the intricacies and complexities of life in rural Bengal. Lal Bihari Dey's other work, viz, Gobinda Samanta drew appreciation even from Charles Darwin, who commented, "*I shall be glad if you would tell him with my compliments how much pleasure and instruction I derived from reading Gobinda Samanta a few years ago.*"¹¹ The subtitle of Ramesh Chandra Dutt's book 'The peasantry of Bengal' speaks about its



nature: “*A view of their condition under the Hindu, the Mohammedan and the English rule and a consideration of the means calculated to improve their future prospects*”. The other book, viz , The Indian Ryots is an exposition of the economic condition of the agrarian situation in European countries and in India. Such a comparative treatment was unthinkable at the time the book came out. It is a pioneering study in comparative agrarian economics and rural institutions.

The Bengal Social Science Association

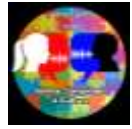
The Bengal Social Science Association was formed in 1867 at the initiative of Rev. James Long and Miss Mary Carpenter. The genesis of the association was in the Asiatic Society on 17th December 1866 in the presence of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal and a large number of European and Indian persons, where a resolution was taken to form such an association with a view to study the ‘people and circumstances of the country’. In the provisional committee, apart from the European luminaries, a large number of Indians, like Pearry Chand Mitra, Ram Chandra Mitra, Keshab Ch. Sen, Monmohan Ghosh, Debendranath Tagore, Rajendra lal Mitra, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and others, were present. The object of the association was “*to collect, arrange and classify series of facts bearing upon the social, moral and intellectual conditions of the people of Bengal ... the most express object of the association was to promote the development of social science in the presidency of Bengal.*” In order to realize these objectives four academic sections were created concerning (1) Jurisprudence and law (2) Education (3) Health (4) Economy and trade. These sections will hold annual meeting, invite papers for which definite guidelines were prescribed and after the deliberations, these will be printed in the transactions of the association. Desiderata or heads of enquiry were prepared for each section and papers were invited. In the section on Economy and Trade, for example, the following academic subdivisions were created, viz banking and currency; Labour; Agriculture; Social economy and in each subdivisions, areas of enquiry were identified. The papers presented in these sessions were objective, analytic and comprehensive. They all followed the guidelines which were, “they (the papers) should be confined as per as practicable, to the relation of facts and observations bearing upon the question and should avoid, as far as may be, the enunciation of general principles and of philosophical theories and reflections. It is



quite true that the promotion of Social Science demands that deductions should be drawn from ascertained facts...” (Regulations regarding paper, Rule 8)

It will turn into dozens of pages to even name the papers which were presented at the different sections of the annual sessions of the Association from 1967 to 1978. Together, they constitute valuable data and observations on different aspects of social, economic and political life of the people including Hindus and Muslims, men and women, artisans, labourers and the educated, ruralites and urban dwellers, economy and trade. As it has been said “In the different sections of the Bengal Social Science Association quite a few important papers were submitted. Indian Society was the focus of their study; as such everything concerning inter human relations, e.g, language and literature, customs and folkways, rites and rituals, proverbs and sayings, economic organization of men and women and others came to be thoroughly studied and discussed at different sections.”¹² Again, “*a look into the papers read at the Bengal Social Science Association will convince one of their high standard of logic, erudition and objectivity. Empiricism and objectivity became almost the keywords of the Association as it matured in age*”.¹³

The Bengal Social Science Association could not last long and ceased to exist from 1878. Internal feud was one main reason for that. At the very start in 1867 Rajendralal Mitra moved a resolution to the effect that “the association as a body shall abstain from expressing its opinion on any social questions that may be brought to its notice and from taking any action for the amendment of any law or custom of the country.” This requisitions having been defeated, Rajendralal Mitra, Romanath Tagore, Digambar Mitra, Jyotindra Mohon Tagore and Greesh Chandra Ghosh resigned from the association. The association was also looked down suspiciously by the native intelligentsia. An article in the ‘Hindu Patriot’ the then widely circulated contemporary newspaper, will bear that out. The suspicion was that some self-seeking native intelligentsia had assembled there to draw favours from Englishmen. The suspicion was baseless but it was unfortunate that beyond 1878, the Bengal Social Science Association could not continue.



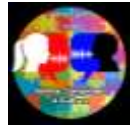
Positivism in Bengal

Starting from the late 1860's, there was another movement in Bengal, i.e, the positivist movement. Contemporaneously with the influence of positivism and Comte in Europe, in Bengal also, a strong group of positivists emerged. Briefly started as the Encyclopaedia of Philosophy has defined it, positivism believes that "Science is the only valid knowledge and that facts the only possible object of knowledge, that philosophy does not possess a method different from science and that the task of philosophy is to find the general principles common to all the sciences and to use these principles as guides to human conduct and as the basis of social organization."¹⁴

True, Positivism as an outlook existed in Europe before Comte. One can trace the origin of Positivism in such 17th century thinking in Bacon, Hobbes and Locke and 18th century thinkers as Condorcet, James Mill, Bentham and Hume. As Bela Duttagupta says, "*The essence of positivism is to be traced in the whole empiricist tradition and in the 18th century philosophy of sensationalism in particular. It devolved on the 19th century positivists to explore and expand the points that all knowledge is derived from sense perception.*"¹⁵

Similarly in India, prominence given to sensory perceptions as a means of knowing the truth and not to any extra sensory agency like God was there in earlier philosophies. These were sceptics, agnostics and atheists, even during the Vedic period, the charvakas/ Lokayatas had absorbed all such previous traits and finally produced a system of philosophy that was uncompromisingly rational and opposed to all dictums that were not founded on sense perceptions.

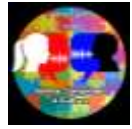
If we look at the works of a Akshay Kumar Dutta, it will appear that he was a Baconian through and through and considered the works of Bacon and Comte to be 'our Sastras', as much as the works of Bhaskara and Aryabhatta as well as Newton and Laplace were.¹⁶ A thorough rationalist outlook on life was evident in the activities of Derozio and his disciplines. Sushobhan Sarkar has called Derozio as "*the stormy petrel of our renaissance*".¹⁷ To the Derozians, Tom Paine's *Age of Reason* was the new gospel. Their short lived journal, The *Enquirer* and bi-lingual periodical '*Jnananweshan*' had strongly advocated widow remarriage even before Vidyasagar did it.



But Positivism as an integrated outlook and as a philosophy was espoused in Europe in the writings of Comte and in Bengal through those who claimed to be the disciples of Comte. They did not have to challenge all the principles of Hindu religion in order to be so as Positivism provided scope for a judicious admixture of tradition and modernity. Among them, we find the names of not only Jogendra Chandra Ghosh, Nagendranath Ghosh and Krishnakamal Bhattacharjee, but also such name as Janakinath Ghoshal, the brother-in-law of Rabindranath Tagore, Hemchandra Bannerjee, the wellknown poet and W.C Bannerjee, the first president of the Indian National Congress. There is another name, i.e, Ishwar Chandra Bannerjee, who, according to Forbes, is none other than our Vidyasagar¹⁸, and Dwaraka Nath Mitra, the friend of Vidyasagar and a famous lawyer, who learned French in order to read August Comte in original.

In the spread of Positivism in Bengal, the foreigners who influenced the local intellectuals are Richard Congrave, Sammuel Lobb and K.S. Macdonald. The people who were most influenced by them were Grish Chandra Ghosh and justice Dwarakanath Mitra. A positivist club who set up in Calcutta in 1873 under their influence whose motto was 'order for its basis, love for its principles and progress for its end.' Vijay Krishna Goswami, who later on turned out to be an utterly religious man and rejected the atheistic aspects of Positivism, retained at the same time the positivist ideal of social service and religion of humanity. Satish Chandra published articles in *The Dawn* interpreting Hindu Social matters from the positivist point of view. Krishnakamal Bhattacharya was contributing articles in the *Bengalee* from the positivist point of view and he declared "I am an atheist, I am a positivist." Jogendra Chandra Ghosh's articles on Hindu joint family and the caste system were written from the positivist approach. It seems that Positivism dominated the *Bengalee* intellectual scene from the 1850s through the 1870s. The philosophy of Comte influenced contemporary Bengal and one positivist writing a letter in the *Bengalee* affirmed, "*that no earnest inquirer can peruse such works as the 'catechism' and 'the positive politics' without being favourably influenced by the moral enthusiasm which pervades them.*"

However, no account of Positivism in Bengal will be complete without mentioning the name of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyya, who was also a confirmed positivist. Through

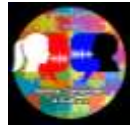


Comte's 'Religion of Humanity' as an impersonal god and as based on the principles of atheism, did not ultimately find its corroboration in Bankim's writings and though Bankim was more influenced by this principle of utilitarianism of Bentham and James Mill, the influence of Comte on Bankim's thought cannot be ignored. Says Brajendranath Seal, "*Evidently the views on man and universe held by thinkers like Mill, Spencer and Darwin, have vitally affected Bankim Chandra's interpretation of Hindu religion and philosophy, but the profoundest influence of all has been that of Auguste Comte, whose Positive Polity and Religion appear in almost everything that our author has to say on domestic, Social and political ideas and institutions and the creation and conservation national life*".¹⁹

Bankim's adherence to positivism became most manifest in his Dharmatattwa (1884-85). The definition of Religion, as given by Bankim, is this: "*Religion in itself expresses the state of perfect unity which is the distinctive mark of man's existence both as an individual and in society, when all the constituent parts of his nature moral and physical are made habitually to converge towards one common purpose.*" So this definition of Religion is both rationalistic and humanistic. He, like Comte, started with the constituent parts of man's nature, moral and physical, though he sought their convergence not in an abstract 'Humanity' (as Comte did) but in a personal pantheistic god'. There are references to Comte with approval, in Bankim's early writings also. In the opening number of *Navajivan*, Bankim contributed an article under the caption *Dharmajignasa*, clearly indicating his preference for a humanistic definition of Religion and quoting with approval the definition proposed by Comte. In *Prachar* likewise he wrote an article entitled 'Hindu Dharma', in which, following the same humanistic approach, he asserted 'that alone was true Religion which furthered the cause of human development- physical, mental and social.' Regarding his *Dharmatattwa* (Krishnacharitra), Binoy Kumar Sarkar offered an equation:

'Dharmatattwa' (Krishnacharitra) = Gita x Comte.²⁰

Without going into further detailed discussion it may be said that minus the idea of atheism, Bankim was greatly influenced by Comte, as he was equally influenced by utilitarianism.



The cult of science which is involved in Positivism had another manifestation in Bankim's writings. Knowing that the basis of Hindu philosophy is deductive knowledge, Bankim pleaded for inculcating the scientific culture to combat this. He pleaded that the universe is guided by certain "invariable physical laws" and expressed the opinion that 'unflinching recognition or the sovereignty of law' reigns over the abstract, metaphysical, thinking of Hindu Philosophy, knowledge of science and scientific thinking was the imperative necessity of the time. To popularise scientific thinking, Bankim wrote '*Vignanrahasya*', wherein such articles as 'Protoplasm', 'the age of man', '*Flight in the sky*', '*Dust*' and many others like that are included. The objective was to popularize science and develop scientific outlook. It may be said that this was another manifestation of the positivist outlook of Bankim.

So, on the whole, if we look at the 19th century social thinkers it will be found that they raised fundamental social questions regarding the bases of social order. Customs, institutions and beliefs which were prevalent for centuries, came under the scanner of their inquisitive mind. And in raising these social questions and issues they not only looked inward towards their own past but they also looked outside and actively interacted with the great empiricist and scientific philosophies which were emerging in the west.

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