Although social scientists have engaged in an exploration of how modern men and women may become subjects as well as objects of modernization, how they might 'get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it' (Berman 1993: 13), one aspect of modern living has consistently eluded investigation. In the context of India's multiple modernities, alongside the boulevard and the monument, the city space and its architecture, the spaces within homes too were being redened and rearranged to accommodate the arrival of modernity. Changing spaces within the home and representations of that change in literary terms can be seen to have functioned as primary markers of modernity in the colonial world. That the material manifestations of the home underwent a transformation in India through colonial contact is undoubted common sense, but very little work has focused on the manner in which these changes occurred. Mapping the political, social and cultural changes in the evolving history of modernity in the Indian context, what follows is a history of a social space, the colonial drawing room (Figure 1): Changes in the form and substance of this room, uniquely a confluence of the public and private within the space of the home, were mediated by the development outside it of certain practices, institutions and spaces characteristic of modernity everywhere. Trams, bookshops, tea-houses, gambling, electric lights, trains, the theatre, the museum and the public library are only some of the spaces in the 19th and early 20th century that characterised modernity in Calcutta, but one of the most crucial, although the most tangentially discussed, was the space of the modern drawing room.

It is my contention that in Bengal, the bourgeois drawing room came into its own at about the same time as the addal (a Bengali word for extended sessions of conversation with friends), which, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has attested, attained respectable legality by its association with literary and political groups in Calcutta in the 1920s and 1930s (Chakrabarty 2001: 100–214). This was also the time when the drawing room transformed itself into its current hybridized form, attaining, in some circles, an aesthetic style and a cultural ambience that was created as a deliberate attempt at Indianness. Here, I shall attempt a narrative history of the cultural space of the modern Indian drawing room as it evolved in Bengal over the course of a century, showing how this meeting of the public and the private within the space of the home metamorphosed from an exercise in colonial mimicry to an attempt at self-definition and national identity. One of the most interesting manifestations of the intrusion of
modernity into the traditional space of the home was to be found in the territorial confluence of the drawing room, the transformation of which tells its own story of identity formation and cultural definition in terms of the evolving individuality of the nation-state.

The sitting-rooms of Young Bengal

In one of the most enviable autobiographies to be written in colonial India, Amador fernandez’s My Life, Nabarun chandra Sen, a well-known Bengal poet of his time, describes the room in which the famous novelist Bankimchandra Chatterjee stayed when he was staying at the home of a friend in Calcutta (1877). He described the room’s arrangement in detail: “The room was small and square, and was furnished with two couches and a cushioned chair. The walls had a few paintings hanging on them, and in one corner, there was a harmonium. I was looking at the way in which the room was decorated and talking to Sanjib-babu” (Sen 1366 BE: vol. 1, 456). My translation. All following translations from the Bengali are mine. ($2)

This account of Bankimchandra’s drawing room, in which the words ‘couches’ and ‘cushioned chairs’ are in English, has an interesting counterpart in Bankimchandra’s own satirical description of the sitting room of a Europeanized babu. In ‘The Confession of a Young Bengali’ (1872) — which referred to the radical students of Doare at the Hindu College between 1826 and 1831 — he describes the room’s arrangement: “The room was small and square, and was furnished with two couches and a cushioned chair. In one corner, there was a harmonium. I was looking at the way in which the room was decorated and talking to Sanjib-babu. I heard that this was Bankimchandra’s drawing room (Bhaskar Chandra). It was a hall adjacent to a small Shiva temple room, and on the far side, there were two rooms. All around the hall, near the walls, there were two or three couches and cushions. The walls had a few paintings hanging on them, and in one corner, there was a harmonium. I was looking at the way in which the room was decorated and talking to Sanjib-babu.” (Sen 1366 BE: vol. 1, 456). My translation. All following translations from the Bengali are mine. ($2)

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