

Review

The Legacy of Vaiṣṇavism in Colonial Bengal, edited by Ferdinando Sardella and Lucian Wong. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020. xiii + 266 pp. ISBN 9781032083650.

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This book is the published outcome of a conference at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies in 2015 on ‘Bengali Vaishnavism in the Modern Era’. It contains an introduction by the editors and eleven chapters in two parts. The first part, ‘Recovering the legacy: how Vaiṣṇavas adopted colonial modalities’ (pp. 1–122), is mainly about Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, and the second part, ‘Contending the portrayal: how ethics shaped the religion of love’ (pp. 123–255), is also about Sahajiyās and Bāuls.

The interesting first chapter, by Varuni Bhatia, discusses how and why Caitanya’s divinity was favoured in modern discourses in Bengal. Some reasons were: the adaptations to Western and Christian Protestant discourses such as the discourse of reform, the importance of Caitanya’s historicity, and ideas of Hindu supremacy. Utilizing publications from nineteenth-century Bengal, Bhatia looks especially at explicit comparisons of Caitanya and Martin Luther that exemplify the reform paradigm, discussions about Caitanya’s divinity, and finally at *avatāra* and the view of Caitanya as the best incarnation when compared to Jesus and Muhammad—which shows, in the view of these Bengali writers, the supremacy of Hindu civilization.

Chapter 2, by Amiya Sen, is a study of the revival of Vaiṣṇavism in colonial Bengal and the position of Bipin Chandra Pal in this revival. The influence of the Brahma Samaj on the revival of Vaiṣṇavism is emphasized. The Brahma Samaj was critical of Vaiṣṇava worship and the figure of Caitanya, but Caitanya nevertheless emerged as an iconic figure of Bengali culture, notes Sen, partly because Bengali Śākta traditions lacked a comparable figure. Vaiṣṇavas were also capable of developing open communal features that Śāktas and Tāntrikas did not possess. Sen thereafter discusses the tension between Advaita Vedānta and Vaiṣṇavism and the hardening of attitudes. Finally, Sen notes the influence of Hegelian idealism and evolutionary theories on Pal’s theology.

In Chapter 3, Santanu Dey writes about the Hari Sabha phenomenon, which represented a new form of organization of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism in colonial Bengal that resembled congregational worship. Dey focuses especially on the reformist organization Sri Krishna Chaitanya Tattva Pracharini Sabha (SKCTPS), which was founded in 1909 and centred on weekly meetings and the publication of tracts. The organization focused in particular on reforming the ‘evils’ affecting the Vaiṣṇava community, that is, on excluding groups on the margins of the Vaiṣṇava community. It was critical also of the Gaudiya Math of Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati, but tried to build links with the conservative Brahmanical community.

Chapter 4, by Gerald Carney, is about the first Vaiṣṇava missionary in the United States, Baba Premananda Bharati, who arrived in New York in 1902 and returned to India in 1907, and also had a shorter stay in the United States from 1910 to 1911. This is a fascinating documentation of an early episode in the globalization of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. The author makes an interesting suggestion of Baba Bharati’s possible influence on Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi, and the essay also contains an interesting summary of the themes in Baba Bharati’s missionary strategy.

In Chapter 5, Kenneth Valpey analyses discourses of the Gaudiya Math on image worship, in particular two articles in the periodical *The Harmonist*, which was published between 1927 and 1937 and established by the founder of the Gaudiya Math, Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati. The essay illustrates the Gaudiya Math’s conservative agenda and its perception of itself as being of global importance.

The last chapter in Part One contains an unfinished essay by Joseph O’Connell (who passed away in 2012), which has been edited and expanded by Amiya Sen and contains some suggestions for further research.

The second part of the book starts with Tony Stewart’s learned essay on ‘The tantalising discourse of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā scholarship’. Stewart argues that nineteenth-century *bhadralok* sensitivities transformed the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition in Bengal and distorted the understanding of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās. His essay deals especially with the problems of studying secret groups such as the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās. His rich essay raises a number of epistemological and ethical issues, and concludes that the uncovering of esoteric knowledge not only disappoints, but that ‘the uncovering can actually destroy it’ (p. 154).

In the following chapter, Sukanya Sarbadhikary presents esoteric Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā texts and interpretations of them by contemporary Sahajiyās. The chapter could have distinguished better between knowledge based on actual observations of human behaviour and knowledge based on texts and verbal statements about behaviour.

In Chapter 9, Jeanne Openshaw discusses Bāuls. Interestingly, she argues that ‘Bāuls’ should not be used as an analytical term, but suggests the term *bartamān-panthīs* and that *bartamān-panthīs* are bearers of the heritage of

ancient Indian materialism (Lokāyata/Cārvāka). The chapter analyses the autograph Bengali manuscript of Rāj Khyāpā, which contains personal verses interwoven with *bartamān-panthī* philosophy.

Chapter 10, by Kiyokazu Okita, is also a textual analysis. Okita's chapter deals with a topic in Gauḍīya theology, the controversy of *parakīyā* versus *svakīyā* (over whether Kṛṣṇa's relations with the *gopīs* were extramarital or marital), and also with the relation of Bengali Vaiṣṇavism and Sahajiyā Vaiṣṇavism and how Vaiṣṇavism as a whole was seen by the *bhadralok* as an embodiment of moral degradation.

Finally, Lucian Wong in his essay documents that attempts to disassociate Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism from *tāntrika* and *sahajiyā* types of Vaiṣṇavism started long before the colonial *bhadralok* raised these issues. Wong argues that Brahmanically aligned Vaiṣṇava normativity was further promoted in colonial times, but that the colonial-era *bhadralok* Vaiṣṇavas continued an existing, precolonial discourse.

In the book, in the discussion of the relations between 'a normative, brahmanically aligned form of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism' and 'the *sahajiyā* phenomenon', issues of caste and class could perhaps have received more attention and been theorized further, and perhaps also more attention could have been paid to the different caste identities and economic positions of the *bhadralok*, especially since the imitation of Brahmanical privileges is such a notable element among new followers of Hindu Vaiṣṇava ideas and practices in Europe and North America. The book is a collection of essays on different topics related to Vaiṣṇavism in colonial Bengal, and it contains a number of interesting studies that exemplify the ways in which sampradayic Hinduism—in this case Vaiṣṇavism, and especially Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism—was part of the religious transformations in colonial South Asia. The book gives examples of this in colonial Bengal, supplementing previous studies. It will be of interest especially to scholars and students of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, but also to scholars and students of the larger religious configuration in colonial Bengal.