



**Ferdinando Sardella and Lucian Wong (eds):** *The Legacy of Vaiṣṇavism in Colonial Bengal*. London: Routledge, 2020, 266 pp.

Bengali Vaiṣṇavism, also known as Gauḍīya or Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, is a vital strand of Vaiṣṇava Hinduism that has attracted a notable amount of academic attention. Many of the early studies focused on the tradition's literary contribution, but important new perspectives have since been added. During the last couple of decades an important actor within this broadening of the field has been the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. The present book is the fruit of a workshop arranged by the Centre in 2015, bringing together scholars from the disciplines of social and intellectual history, philology, theology, and anthropology to examine the impact of Bengali Vaiṣṇavism in colonial Bengal.

A particular aim of the workshop was to problematize the oft-held views of the colonial era as either a rupture with an authentic pre-modern tradition or more often as a reformation of a corrupt moribund one. This is the theme of the introductory chapter by editors Lucian Wong and Ferdinando Sardella. Wong and Sardella briefly delineate the historical background of the theme of the book – the British colonial hold over Bengal from 1757 to 1947 and all the societal and intellectual changes to which it led – but note that the emphasis on change and 'reform' during this period has led to a blindness to the fact that pre-existing

Hindu religious currents and traditions (*saṃpradāya*) did not disappear but rather continued to exert an often powerful influence on society, often in tandem with the reformers and their movements.

Bearing this in mind, the book itself is divided into two parts. The first deals with how Bengali Vaiṣṇavas adopted colonial modalities. For example, in chapter one Varuni Bhatia writes about how the *bhadralok* (the educated Hindu Bengalis) engaged with the life of Caitanya in the colonial period. Caitanya (1486–1533), the founder of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, seen by his followers as an *avatāra* or a descended form of the divine couple of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, was recast as a religious and particularly social reformer, often compared to Luther, and rather than being seen as a divine personage he was often portrayed as a human figure. Bhatia notes that this shift alerts us to questions of the translatability of religious concepts, questions raised by many of these colonial authors themselves.

Chapter four may be given as another example. Gerald T. Carney presents the reader with a fascinating portrait of Baba Premananda Bharati (born Surendranath Mukherjee, 1858–1914), the first Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava who endeavoured to spread the tradition's teachings to the West, teaching in the USA in 1902–1907 and 1910–11. Carney offers the reader a wealth of primary material about Baba Bharati, who is fascinating not only as a pioneer but as a meeting point of the traditions of Prabhu Jagadbandhu (1871–1921)

and Rādhāramaṇa Carāṇa Dāsa Deva (1853–1905), both important and controversial Vaiṣṇava teachers in their own right.

While part one is interesting and important, it is part two that takes the book to an entirely new level, as the chapters here contend with the portrayal of a Vaiṣṇava reformation during the colonial era. Much of the motivation for this reform sprang from an unease about the perceived loose sexual morals of certain Vaiṣṇavas, often called *sahajiyās*. This unease has also carried over into scholarship in both revulsion and titillation. In a brilliant and provocative essay Tony K. Stewart explores the metahistory of *sahajiyā* scholarship and the multifaceted power of sexuality and secrecy.

In chapter eight, building on the fieldwork she did for her doctoral dissertation, Sukanya Sarbadhikary deals with the secret texts of these *sahajiyās* themselves. The excerpts Sarbadhikary presents may not be literary masterpieces, but they present their listeners or (in our case) readers with a fascinating insight into the *sahajiyās*' rich oral tradition, one in which key Vaiṣṇava terms are given new esoteric meanings that are unintelligible for outsiders. Sarbadhikary's ethnological work is characterized by a remarkable sensitivity to her informants and material.

The main threads of the book are tied together in Lucian Wong's concluding chapter, 'Colonial morals, Vaiṣṇava quarrels: tracing the source of nineteenth-century anti-Sahajiyā polemics'. Wong argues that the unease about the *sahajiyās* among

the Bengali *bhadralok* during colonial times stemmed not only from their Western education and sensibilities but also formed a link in a longer tradition of anti-*sahajiyā* writing. Wong's carefully argued chapter thus exemplifies how the colonial era offered an opportunity for forces of both rupture and continuity, often creatively working together.

It is difficult to maintain a uniform level of excellence in an edited volume, and this book is no exception. Despite the systematizing efforts of Amiya Sen, the authors interchangeably write about Bengal and Bengali and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, while referring to the same tradition. This naturally reflects a larger terminological confusion within the subfields of this scholarly community, but the editors could have smoothed this out. The same applies to transcription systems; the name of one key text is written as both 'Caitanya Caritāmṛta' and 'Chaitanya Charitamrita'.

But these are very minor quibbles. This is an excellent volume, bringing together both senior and junior scholars of the field and combining careful philological, historical, and ethnographic work with exciting theory about a key era for this religious tradition. The editors are to be commended for their work in bringing all this together so organically: the chapters do not simply deal with the same subject but actually complement each other.

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